Borderline

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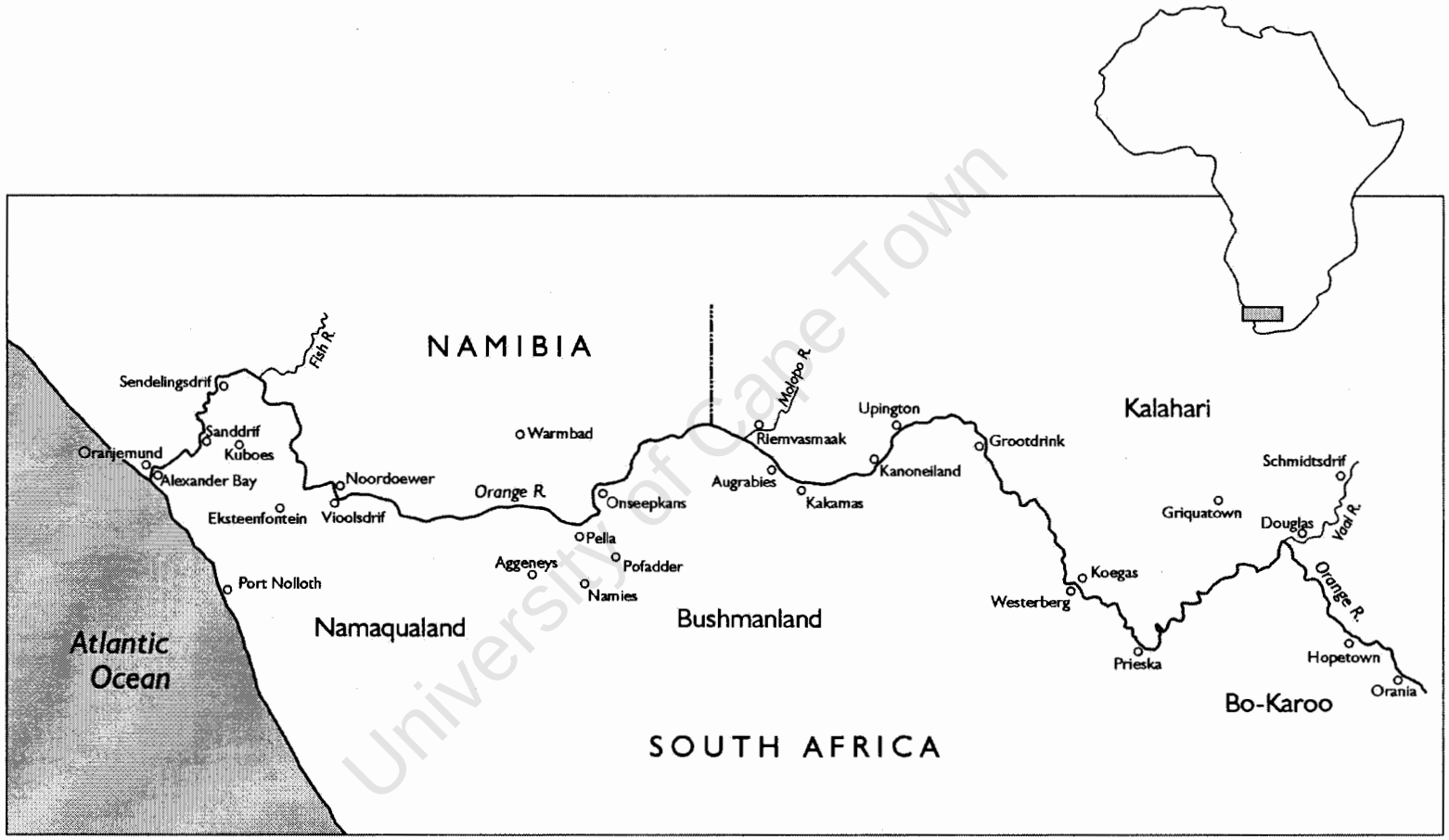


I

The town of Orania is fenced and, as a sign at the entrance warns, strictly private. We turn into the gates, drive slowly down the main, prefabricated street. A sign on the pavement announces *Eie arbeid maak ons vry* - our labour frees us. Did the author of this sign really wish to echo Auschwitz? We drive past rows of temporary-looking homes. Verwoerd's name is emblazoned in gold outside a low-roofed suburban building: *Verwoerd Gedenkversameling* - memorial collection.

On the afternoon of September 6 1966 Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd was stabbed four times. The first blow pierced his burgundy tie a few inches below the knot, the other three damaged the left shoulder, right upper arm and left side of his dark suit. The architect of apartheid

slumped forward and died in his seat in parliament. The clothes he was wearing form the centrepiece of Orania's memorial collection. Red arrows show the stab wounds. The contents of his pockets, scattered about his shoes, attempt to show the kind of man he was. A comb, a pocket watch, a wallet containing R1.45. A booking for an eye test, a membership card for a piscatorial society, complimentary season tickets to Twentieth Century Fox cinemas.

On the outskirts of town a khaki-clad farmer on a tractor points us in the direction of the river. Christopher, Laurence and I – friends, fools, novice paddlers – are about to set off down the lower reaches of the Orange in two yellow boats. Here the Great River, as it was known before the coming of the Europeans, spawns a thin green line through arid South Africa: the Karoo, the Kalahari, Bushmanland, Namaqualand and the Richtersveld. Ahead of us are fourteen-hundred kilometres of water, behind us lives we don't mind leaving for a while. We encounter another sign on the gravel track down to the river. Winners never lose hope, it informs us, those who lose hope never win. Orania is odd. But not in the ways I thought it would be. For one, the Afrikaner *volkstaat*, or homeland, is no tradition-bound, Mormon-like community. It has one of the country's largest pecan orchards, and one of its most modern dairies. Anna Boshoff, Hendrik Verwoerd's daughter, is principal of the school. She had shown me around the day before, sad-eyed, business-like, her hair pulled back in a bun. Pupils are given their work a week in advance. They do all their assignments on computer, a process their teacher monitors from a terminal. They don't wear uniforms and their hours of attendance are flexible. The school is, by anyone's standards, liberal. Which is not an adjective I was expecting to apply in Orania. Later, watching young men pack melons on Orania's farm, the words 'poor white' flashed through my mind. I caught myself. What did I expect? Poor blacks doing this job? Only in South Africa – and certain other ex-

colonies, I suppose – is the sight of whites doing manual labour unusual. I had witnessed the norm for the northern Cape, indeed for most of rural South Africa, on a nearby farm. The farm manager – white, of course – instructed a truckload of labourers from the local township: '*Ek wil net julle poephols sien vandag, nie julle gesigte nie* - I only want to see your arseholes today, not your faces.' They were to weed all day for R17.

Professor Carel Boshoff, Orania's community leader and the driving force behind the *volkstaat*, invited me into his office. He was immaculately dressed, with clipped white beard, shrewd eyes, the same business-like manner as his wife Anna. The type of man who would look good with a cane. Boshoff sat behind his polished desk and talked of the Oranians. They view their private town as the first instalment of a *volkstaat* that will eventually stretch out across the plains of the northern Cape to the sea. Orania was built in 1970 to house canal builders working on the Orange River Project. The canals were to channel water from the Hendrik Verwoerd and P.K. le Roux dams – now Gariep and Vanderkloof – to the interior. The town stood empty for five years on completion of the project. In 1991 a consortium of Afrikaners, under the guidance of Boshoff, bought the town. They chose to found their *volkstaat* in this remote region, Boshoff told me, so as to avoid the undue pressures of the outside world. Seen differently, the Oranians have drawn their wagons into a laager. They resist black South Africa, as their forebears once resisted the British, from the banks of the Orange River.

Even as Boshoff spoke to me of his determination that there be no misuse of other racial groups in Orania, I couldn't help feeling that this was an accidental by-product of the *volkstaat* policy of separate development. Dislodged as I was by a day of collapsing stereotypes, I still felt that the unfailingly courteous people of Orania, who were quietly getting on with their own lives, had somehow got it all wrong. I

had heard a conversation on the radio some months earlier. Two of Hendrik Verwoerd's grandsons were discussing the future of the Afrikaner people. The one, Carel Boshoff jnr, lives in Orania. The other, Wilhelm Verwoerd, is an ANC member. The conversation, though genial and erudite, didn't flow. The cousins were talking past one another. Carel's arguments were grounded in fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of losing language and culture, fear of unemployment and of crime. Wilhelm's arguments were grounded in love. He urged Afrikaners to break out of their tight communities and talk to other races, to realise how many of their fears are in fact shared. He impressed upon his cousin how radically one's point of view changes when one begins to talk. It was a compelling interview, one which echoed the way Jesus broke the impasse between himself and the Grand Inquisitor: 'Your logic is strong, but my love is stronger.'

We turned into Orania caravan park, and saw the river for the first time. The muddy brown weight of the Orange pressed silently past dense green banks, past the distant yellow of the Free State wheat fields and the cumulus bundled overhead, white on blue. I walked across the well-watered lawns to the acacias on the bank of the river, stood there looking out over the broad sweep of water. Will

you help us, I wondered? Will you carry us safely to the sea? A piece of driftwood floated past. I did a quick calculation. Travelling in a current of, say, three kilometres an hour, it would reach the Atlantic in under twenty days – provided it stayed out of eddies, of course, and somehow survived the Augrabies Falls. We were banking on thirty to forty days, given that we'd only be on the water for a quarter of any given day.

A vehicle crunched off the gravel into the caravan park. I turned to see Felix Unite jump from the passenger seat of a Landrover. He and his two brothers would be paddling with us for the first six days. Felix walked towards me, short and strong, tan, wizened. 'I wonder what the rich are doing today,' he said. His usual exuberant self. Dave and Peter Unite parked the vehicle and joined us; they're taller than Felix, calmer, more solvent.

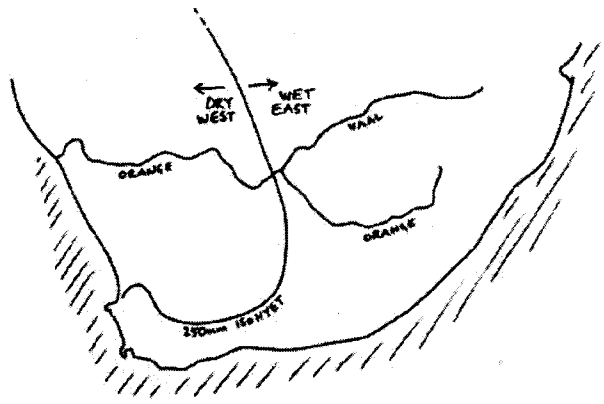
An hour later we eased ourselves – laden, wobbly, exultant – out onto the water. Within a minute we were in the full of the current. Just the sky up above us, and beneath us the back of a great liquid god snaking away across a sub-continent. Two strips of dusty green bush welded the blue and the brown together. The only sign of human endeavour was the occasional pipe extending from the undergrowth, reaching out like a straw into a bowl of chocolate milk. We lost all sense of the adjacent land, of Orania's pecans and the Free State's wheat. That first half-hour was quiet. We were getting to know the Orange, finding its rhythm, and ours, allowing it to absorb our alien presence – six centaur-like creatures, torsos emerging from hulls. I looked to my left. Dave and Felix, their faces and hands white with lotion, were paddling Prijon Belugas, thermoplastic kayaks like mine. They dipped their paddles with the unconscious ease of assembly machines. Beyond them, in a double sea-kayak, also made from bomb-proof heat-moulded plastic, were Laurence and Christopher, broad-rimmed, long-sleeved, splashing a bit, having trouble

synchronising their stroke. To my right was Peter in a fast fibreglass boat. I tried to match his easy rhythm, but lost it after three or four strokes. Watching the casual roll of his shoulders, I realised how lucky we were to be paddling with the Unites. All three were veteran paddlers; they would teach us much over the next six days.

Our major concern for now, however, was keeping up. After half an hour they upped the tempo and it was all the three of us could do to keep them in sight. Our decision to forgo all training, to get fit on the river, had not taken three old river pros into account. As we cranked away, stroke after stroke, coaxing our heavy boats through the water, through the gurgle and hiss of our own bow waves, we had cause to regret some of the excesses of the previous night. We had been staying with my friends Craig and Catherine on a bend in the Modder River near Kimberley. We finished packing the boats at 10 p.m., then settled down to a late dinner. Everybody was in high spirits, we three about to embark on a grand adventure, Laurence's father Fred away from the office, in the very heart of the country, Craig and Catherine with a house full of guests. The wine flowed, the whisky flowed, liqueurs came out. Catherine demanded dope from us long-haired Capetonians. Of the conversation, which pulsed and zagged and panhandled off in odd directions all night long, I remember nothing. We got to bed an hour before we were due to get up.

The Unites eased off the pace after lunch. They helped us tweak our backrests, adjust footpedal settings. We discovered various new muscles and learned, courtesy of Dave, that there is more than one way to 'turn a blade.' We paddled for two and a half hours, then stopped for the day. I hauled my boat onto the grassy bank, and sat down in the sun. At first it brought on a wave of delicious fatigue. Then, after some moments, it appeared to be streaming through the high, lead-glass windows of my geography class at school. Our teacher leaned back in his chair and nodded toward the rainfall

distribution map on the blackboard: 'The 250 millimetre isohyet pegs arid South Africa.' His terse delivery. The sensual curve of the isohyet. And the mystery of that vast region it defined, those barren reaches which receive less than 250 mm of rain per annum, those reaches to which the Orange appears as a godsend, a lifeline.



The mystery stayed with me. Years later, two days shy of my thirtieth birthday, I jumped into my truck and escaped to Bushmanland. The space and solitude were a revelation to me – something far deeper than my fondness for succulents, or the colour brown. I was mesmerised by the silence, by the emptiness and the heat. The utter nothingness of the near featureless expanses. These things seemed to me to be charged with spiritual possibilities. A friend had recommended William Charles Scully's *Further Reminiscences of a South African Pioneer* (1913). What Scully lived for during his trying sojourn as a magistrate on the northern border, was 'a periodic plunge into the cleansing fires of Bushmanland.' Yes, catharsis – I could see that. This was a place of renewal, of clarity and vision.

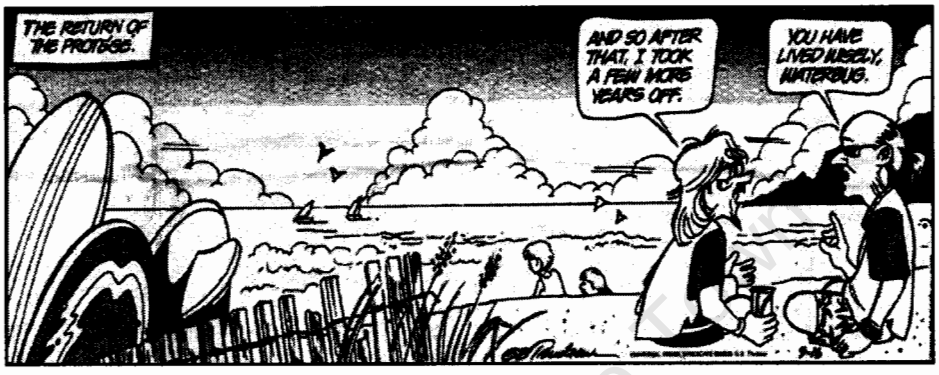
I wanted to camp in amongst the *kokerbome* - quiver trees on the farm Gannabos near Loeriesfontein. I lied to the farmer, telling him I was writing a book on arid South Africa. I was so taken with the stark beauty of the interior that I extended my trip up to the Orange River, Kakamas, Upington, and on to Gous in the Kalahari where my friend Lennart was prospecting for diamonds. The red dunes, the yellow grass, the massive encircling sky. And the people. Everyone I met

was a character. In cities we rub together, our jagged edges are smoothed, we come to resemble one another. But out here people were still craggy. Each farmer and labourer was a true original, each shopkeeper, petrol attendant and drunk. I decided to make a truth of that Gannabos lie – decided, that is, to write a book on arid South Africa.

Christopher and I had been planning a trip up the east coast of Africa in a dhow. I speak no Portuguese, Arabic or Swahili, though, know nothing of the history of East Africa, the politics. I would always have been a tourist on that dhow. Here, in this landscape, I knew something of the people's situation, and I speak good Afrikaans. If I winged it I could be an insider. Back in Cape Town, I started to read up on the history of the interior, the accounts of pioneer travellers and early magistrates. Most of the stories eventually gravitated towards the Orange. I discovered that this river, once the historic meeting point of peoples, wends its way through an epic slice of frontier history. Just as so many dramas of the Arab world are acted out around its springs, so the story of the South African interior finds its way, again and again, to the sinuous oasis that is the Orange. '*Water is lewe*,' said Nak Reichert, a farmer I met on my travels through Bushmanland, 'water is life.' He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger: '*As ek maar net so 'n straaltjie Oranjerivierwater gehad het* - if only I had a stream of Orange River water this size, things would look very different around here.'

Chris agreed to forgo the dhow, to paddle the lower reaches of the Orange instead. Laurence hum-ed and ah-ed. I left a message on his cellphone that eventually did the trick: 'Lol, your namesakes Laurens van der Post and Oom Paul Kruger defined themselves in moments such as this. What are *you* going to do?' We planned our trip for January. I finished a teaching contract in November, Christopher's studies wouldn't start again until late February, and

Laurence's dissertation, well, it was in a state of continual postponement anyway. This list of activities brings a smile to my face. It makes us sound diligent. A cartoon I gave Laurence is closer to the truth.



Laurence might as easily have given the cartoon to me, or to Chris. Laurence – climber, surfer, boy scout – has been a student for ten years. I've studied, lectured, studied and farmed, taken years off in between. Chris has lived wisely – alone on a dhow off east Africa for a year, as a breakfast chef in south England, as editor to an English language newspaper in La Paz, Bolivia.

I approached Felix, owner of a commercial river operation on the Orange, about what boats we should use, about food and obstacles and dangers. I had first met Felix in the mid eighties. My father and I had gone to his shop in Paarden Island to buy a sailboard. Felix plucked at the mast strapped to our roofracks, muttered 'spaghetti.' We followed him into his salesroom where he impressed upon us the firmness of the masts he was selling. A few years later Felix guided me and my family, and twenty other people, on a five day canoe trip down the Orange. His stories by the fireside are etched in my memory – the time his dog Sparkplug saved him from a bull, how he sailed into the Seychelles a day after Mad Mike Hoare's failed coup, was mistaken for a mercenary and imprisoned. Felix invited me to his

stone and thatch home at Kommetjie on the south peninsula, his 270-degree sea view. He came out to meet me in a Speedo, brown and compact, beaming smile, iron grip. He sent me out to sea in his Beluga kayak. On my return he grilled prawns and talked of the river for an hour, of living on its banks. In the end Felix succumbed to his own enthusiasm. He asked whether he and his brothers might join us for the first few days. I was delighted. So were Laurence and Christopher. We had been afraid of the unknown, of what a trip like ours entailed, of how to structure each day, how to cope with heat and fatigue. Here were three old pros to show us the way. We had planned to start our journey at the confluence of the Orange and Vaal rivers, the gateway, in many ways, to arid South Africa. Felix suggested we put in higher up, at Orania. He liked the big water of Thunder Alley, a day above the confluence. We liked the symmetry of paddling from Orania to Oranjemund, a mining settlement at the mouth.

We woke up grumpy. The hangovers that had dogged our first day on the river were mostly gone, but our bodies were sore from the forty-odd kilometre paddle, and from sleeping on cold ground. I walked over to the river with my coffee, watched it move beneath the layer of mist it had breathed into the crisp dawn air. I followed its course down to a railway bridge, to a blockhouse on the south bank, built by the British to protect the bridge during the Anglo-Boer War. Inland from the blockhouse, at the foot of a silo which dominates the undulating landscape, is fifteen hectares of fenced-off veld. This is the site of Orange River Station concentration camp. Rina Wiid, who wouldn't look amiss in a *kappie*, the bonnet worn by Boer women prisoners, is custodian of this immaculately preserved site. She had shown me around the day before our trip. I saw where the parade ground had

been – in one hundred years the vegetation has still not recovered. Within minutes we had seen baked bean and bully beef tins, a cooking screen, two kettles, pieces of a ceramic water cask, a coffee grinder, a handful of buttons, several horseshoes, a blue medicine bottle and a bucket. Rina pointed to a tin with two holes punched in it, told me it had once contained condensed milk.

Many of the imperial favourites accompanied the British to the front – Rose's lime juice, Eno's fruit salts, Crosse and Blackwell ideal milk. Rina's museum displays rarer objects: a mouth organ, champagne bottles, the remains of a morse-code machine. More touching than these relics of men at war, though, were the signs of the children – a slate pencil, marbles, a doll's head. I saw a doorknob and a porcelain tap, items that could only have been brought into camp by Boer women as souvenirs of their homes. Several concentration camps lay near the Orange, which for much of its length had become a frontier between warring nations. English commandos would cross the river into the Orange Free State, loot farms and then retreat to the safety of the Cape. Women and children were allowed fifteen minutes to pack their things into an ox-wagon before their houses were torched. Earlier in my visit the war had seemed but another chapter in what Jan Smuts termed the wonderful romance of South Africa. The tap and the doorknob, the doll's head, now reminded me that 28 000 Boer women and children had died in British concentration camps. This was four times the number of Boers to have died in action. What set of circumstances, I wondered, had led to the horror of these camps? I knew that in 1899 prolonged disputes between Britain and the Boer republics of Transvaal and the Orange Free State over their

sovereignty – which is to say, over the ownership of their diamond and gold fields – had spilled over into war. Beyond this, my knowledge of the conflict was sketchy. The Boers, explained Rina, scored some early successes. The British drew on the resources of Empire, landed thousands of troops, and slowly groped their way towards the correct tactics to employ against entrenched defenders. When the British juggernaut rolled into Bloemfontein and Pretoria, the war seemed all but over. In fact, said Rina, most of the bitterness was still to come. Christiaan De Wet rallied the Free State burghers into mobile fighting units and launched a guerilla war against the lumbering British columns. De la Rey and Botha did the same in the Transvaal. Smuts invaded the Cape. The British, realising they couldn't defeat the Boers on the battlefield alone, embarked on a scorched earth policy. They laid waste to the Boer heartland, destroying their farmsteads and crops, concentrating their families in camps, crisscrossing the interior with 6 000 kilometres of barbed wire, 8 000 blockhouses. (This wire, Rina told me, is still used by farmers today.) At first, all the Boer commandos needed was a dark night and a pair of wirecutters. Horatio Kitchener, though, was prepared for a war of attrition. 'Extermination,' he supposedly said, 'is a long and very tiring business.' Thirty thousand farms were razed to the ground. The Boers, increasingly cut off from their lines of supply and aware that their families were dying in the camps, were at the end of their tether after two years of this informal war. They negotiated peace in Vereeniging in May 1902. Deneys Reitz, who fought on to the bitter end, described the three hundred Boers who gathered to elect their representatives to the peace conference as 'starving, ragged men clad in skins.'

Rina's narrative ended here. The conflict, however, would cast a long shadow over twentieth century South Africa, delaying democracy by ninety-two years. The Boers insisted upon, and got,

Britain's assurance that blacks would not get franchise rights in the annexed republics. 'You have only to sacrifice the nigger completely,' said Lord Milner, 'and the game is easy.' Both Briton and Boer had downplayed the extent of black involvement in the war for fear of a post-war demand for the vote. During the siege of Mafikeng, for instance, Cronje wrote to Baden-Powell: 'It is understood that you have armed Bastaards, Fingoes and Barolongs against us. In this you have committed an enormous act of wickedness the end of which no man can foresee! You have created a new departure in South African history. It has hitherto been a cardinal point in South African ethics, both English and Dutch, to view with horror the idea of arming black against white, and I would ask you... even if it cost you the loss of Mafikeng to disarm your blacks and thereby act the part of a white man in a white man's war.' A white man's war? Cronje had three hundred armed blacks with him in the Boer trenches. After decades of revisionist history, there is today a dawning awareness that blacks participated in the war. Most South Africans, though, would be surprised to learn that as many as 100 000 blacks served with the British army and at least 10 000 with the Boer forces. The majority were transport or dispatch riders, scouts, guides, sentries, runners and horse boys, regimental chefs, laundresses, trench-diggers and fencers, but several thousand also served as combatants. Equally surprising, I imagine, would be news of the black concentration camps, which have been all but expunged from history. When the British learned that the Boers were commandeering livestock and crops from rural kraals, they herded 120 000 blacks into a network of 'refugee' camps. Tents were reserved for the white camps – 'on no account,' warned a memo, 'must the natives be given these.' Maintenance was calculated at 4½ d per adult per day, half that of the white camps. Conditions were appalling and at least 20 000 blacks, possibly more, died. Given that almost as many blacks died in concentration camps

as whites, it's bitterly unfair that the wrongs of the camps should have fuelled Afrikaner nationalism and so spawned the wrongs of apartheid. An opportunity for Afrikaners and Africans to emphasise their common suffering was lost. The greatest legacy of the concentration camp, it seems, is the outraged righteousness of its victims. The Afrikaners, like the Israelis (who also came to power in 1948), trampled on other people because they themselves were trampled on in camps.

The Anglo-Boer War was the last war in history where fatalities from disease outnumbered other causes of death. The medical care available to prisoners and troops had, however, improved significantly since the grim lessons of the Crimea and Florence Nightingale. Emily Hobhouse was South Africa's Florence. She heard reports of farm burnings and set sail for South Africa. Only on her arrival in Cape Town did she discover the existence of the concentration camps. Hobhouse visited several camps, including Orange River Station in April 1901. She was horrified by the suffering, disease and mortality. The camps, she noted, lacked fuel, bedding and soap, there was insufficient clean water, the food was of low nutritional value, there was an overconcentration of people and the sanitation was shocking. Hobhouse saw herself as dispensing hope: 'A Boer can survive on just one meal of maize a day, but he must be able to eat that maize with hope. And it is the hope that is dying.' On her return to Britain Hobhouse exposed the truth of the camps to a reluctant establishment. She canvassed noblemen, church leaders, politicians, addressed twenty-six meetings in twenty-nine days. The British press attributed a photograph of Lizzie van Zyl, lying on a cot with the doll Emily had given her, to poor mothering. The Boer women, in turn, talked of meat '*lettiglik aan die onbind* - literally disintegrating.' They spread stories of metal barbs in the tinned food, ground glass in the sugar.

But the horror of the camps, so far as I can see, was due less to malice, than to poor administration and questionable priorities. Kichener reportedly told a doctor: 'You want pills and I want bullets; bullets come first.' Within a few months, though, the doctors were getting their pills. Thanks to Emily Hobhouse the camps had become an international scandal. A civil administration took over and death rates plummeted.

Soon after lunch – huddled together in the shade of a lone acacia – we arrived at Hell's Gate. This rapid marks the entrance of a thirty kilometre basalt gorge called Thunder Alley. At places the gorge is as narrow as fifteen metres, with the full force of the Orange jostling to get through. None of the rapids in the gorge proper, though, is the equal of Hell's Gate. Even the so-called chicken run on the right has a large hole followed by a stopper, a standing wave formed by water flowing over a rock and then piling back on top of itself. We gathered in groups on the north bank, pointed, planned, discussed, splintered off to investigate some new line, returned and regrouped in fresh

combinations. 'I've never been so scared,' confided Chris. Neither had I. Oh for the courage of Mary Kingsley, who died of typhoid while nursing Boer prisoners in the concentration camps. Kingsley records her joyous response to big water during her *Travels in West Africa* (1897): 'Round and round we spun in an exultant whirlpool, which, in a lighthearted, malicious joking way, hurled us tail first out of it into the current. Now the grand point in these canoes of having both ends alike declared itself; for at this juncture all we had to do was to revolve on our own axis and commence life anew with what had been the bow for the stern.'

Hell's Gate didn't look that difficult to run, but the consequences if we came out of our boats were serious. Thunder Alley doglegged right just below the rapid. With the whole river ricochetting off the left hand wall, there was a very real chance of being pinned underwater. I decided, privately, to sit this one out. Felix eventually tired of the talk and walked off to his boat. He paddled river-right, skirted the hole, sliced through the edge of the stopper and eddied out a few yards downstream of us. So easy. Pete followed. I was beginning to regret my decision when Dave breezed through.

Chris and Laurence were next up in the double. They approached the pour-over above the hole too far to the left. Laurence was fighting to

correct this, but a double sea-kayak, especially when loaded, is about as manoeuvrable as an oil tanker. They shot the pour-over and boomed on into the teeth of the hole. First Chris then Laurence vanished entirely from view. I didn't realise this at the time as I was taking a photograph, so I thought, of them punching through the stopper. The resultant picture shows no trace of them, not a helmet, not a paddle blade, not even a splash.

And then they came tearing on through, all water and spray and shrieks of exhiliration. Their combined weight, along with one hundred plus kilograms of fully-laden boat, had proved unstoppable.
I didn't have a choice any more. The other five had all safely negotiated Hell's Gate. I could hardly coil my bowrope and lead my boat downstream as if she were some recalcitrant nag. I headed back to the sandbank we had beached on an hour ago, stopping to pee on the way – my third since arriving at Hell's Gate. I pulled on my life-jacket and fastened the clip of my helmet, climbed into the cockpit and secured my splash-deck. I banged on my helmet once or twice with the flat of my hand and then slid into the current. It's a whole lot easier to read one's line from the elevation of the rocks than from the cockpit

of a boat. I could only see as far as the V-shaped tongue that fed into the first little pour-over. Beyond that the river was a mystery to me. Remembering Laurence's incorrect line, I headed further right than I would have. I felt myself being sucked, inexorably, towards the smooth receding hump of the pour-over. As my boat picked up speed on the crest, I sat tall to see what lay ahead. Down to my left, was the deep churning maw of the hole. It had the manic intensity of a car-wash. I jammed rudder right and pulled like fury. The nose of my boat skirted the edge of the hole, then bit into the wave which now towered above me and away to my left. I braced frantically as the wall of water slapped my head and torso down to the right. All was dark for a moment and then I was through – bright and soundless, blinded by spray. I wiped my eyes and looked up at the black rock to my right. Laurence, waiting with a throw-line, gave the thumbs-up. The current now swept me towards the far wall. 'Lean downstream,' I heard my father's voice say. Which in this case meant hug the rock, don't lean away from it. His advice, ingrained on trips down the Breede all those years ago, saved me a fall. My paddle and helmet clattered off rock and then I was free, heading downriver.

The next hour was fast with several fun rapids. These were in fact easier to handle than the flats, where an excess of water swirled about in greasy eddies, as if it were not quite sure what to do with itself. We paddled single file, stretched out, in a subconscious attempt, perhaps, to escape the garish reds and yellows of our companions' boats and helmets, to be alone with the brown and the black and the blue of water-rock-sky. After some kilometres we regrouped, put down our paddles, and leaned back to investigate the sculpted walls that hemmed us in. The sensuous curves of the basalt made it seem as if we had been weeks already without women, without the mystery their presence breeds. 'So *kleinboet*,' Dave asked Felix, 'what effect is this rock having on your hormones?' Felix said something about a black

bikini and the two of them paddled off in a gust of laughter. They were referring to an incident that had taken place that morning. We had met a young woman in a black bikini and pink sunglasses swimming in the shallows under Hopetown bridge. She and her boyfriend, drying off on the bank, had stopped to break a long hot drive. They came from Rustenburg, near Johannesburg, she said, and were off to seek their fortunes in Cape Town. There was something of Bonnie and Clyde about them. Felix paddled off mid-conversation. 'That little black bikini,' he explained when we caught up with him, 'it sent my hormones into a complete panic.'

We made good progress down Thunder Alley. We were somewhat concerned, though, as the smooth black rock didn't look good for camping. Then, shortly before sunset, the river provided a stretch of lawn that wouldn't have been out of place as the par 3 ninth on the Thunder Alley Links. Several of our party took to the water. The line of bathers, standing waist-deep in the numinous evening light, reminded me of nothing so much as a painting I had once seen, in a gallery in some European city, of converts awaiting the arrival of John the Baptist from out of the desert.

I left camp before the others. That stretch of dawn solitude down the lower reaches of Thunder Alley is perhaps the hour of our trip I cherish most. Just me, and river, and silence. And then a gemsbok flicking its

ears on a low rise. Later, as the basalt began to thin out, a lone mare rolled on the bank. Three egrets looked on. I thought of Willem van Riet and his pioneering solo paddle down the Orange as an eighteen-year-old in 1958. I remembered his loneliness: '*Niks kan die eensame aande langs die vuur uitwis nie* - nothing can erase those lonely nights by the fire, they are branded in my memory forever.' We had discovered in Orania that Willem's son Louw was paddling in his father's wake. Louw van Riet and his friend Mickey du Toit had put in at Aliwal North. Willem waved them off, standing on the same spot where his father had stood forty years earlier. The two twenty-year-olds had passed through Orania three weeks before us. They too experienced loneliness. 'Five days into our trip,' Mickey later told me, 'our talking was up, we ran out of words, stories and thoughts.' They would chat for fifteen minutes each morning and then paddle the rest of the day in silence. They barked at the baboons. Mickey pieced together the movie *Forrest Gump*, scene by scene, for days on end. Louw took to singing snippets of conversation: 'Oh mighty Mickey, mighty Mickey, where will we stop for lunch?'

We struck camp that afternoon by a copse of willow trees just short of a weir under the Douglas-Prieska bridge. We hadn't catered as sensibly as the Unites. We found ourselves craving energy foods

and so Laurence and Christopher set off in search of peanuts, bananas, isotonic drinks. They returned an hour later. As they strolled into camp, lit by sun slanting through

the willows, Laurence shirtless with a box of supplies, Christopher gaily swinging three fish from the end of a paddle, I felt as if I was on the banks of the Mississippi in the nineteenth century, which is to say, as free of cares as Huckleberry, self-sufficient on his raft. This was the moment, for me, that we entered fully into the life of the river. And then, dead on cue, as if to toast our arrival, a large man with a red moustache paddled over from the opposite bank. He warned us that a Cape Cobra had bitten somebody here the previous week. I stopped trampling the long grass in search of a level patch on which to sleep.

Leon lives under the bridge in a caravan abandoned by the Department of Works. The Orange is all the world he needs. He used to pan for diamonds, but now subsists off the river. He takes long trips in his Indian canoe. His cargo: two dogs, a mattress, a speargun, a .22-calibre rifle and a 50-kilogram bag of salt. He shoots carp and *duiker*, a small buck, and uses the salt to cure the meat. Leon met our knowing looks with a wink: '*Ek is nie rerig 'n poacher nie, maar ek het my eie toestemming* - I'm not really a poacher, but I do give myself permission.' At sunset Leon's friend Louwtjie arrived to fish. Louwtjie has lived by the river all his life. In his youth he built a canoe from old sheets of corrugated iron, strips of conveyor belt and tar. He regaled us with tales of the river as he baited his rods and fitted them to a

stand rigged, quite literally, with bells and flashing lights. Just as Louwtjie was settling into his deck chair, and we were wondering how we might extricate ourselves from his monologue, another vehicle arrived. Christopher slipped off to prepare the fish he had bartered on the bridge that day. Laurence and I strolled over to the newcomer. Jan Baartman seemed more interested in chatting to mad Englishmen, as he later called us, than in fishing. He produced a coolbox and we sat down on the river bank, looking out over the weir-slowed water as it slid by in the all-pervading twilight. The aches we carried from the long hot reaches we'd paddled that afternoon dissolved with the first sip of cold beer. Jan was tall, tanned, sinewy, he'd worked for National Parks for thirty years. His conversation roamed southern Africa with casual ease. I have never met anyone, I remember thinking, who better fits Martin Amis's formula: 'rangy, big-cocked, well-travelled.' Jan talked of Augrabies, of bats catching insects at dusk, hawks catching bats. And of *die kaal rotswande* - the naked grey rock that would forever be a part of him. He talked farming, then history: '*Ons land is jonk, kêrels, my oom en tante is in 'n konsentrasie kamp dood* - our country is young, fellows, my uncle and aunt died in a concentration camp.' The talk turned to politics: '*Die bruin mens is a mens vernietig* - the brown people are a people destroyed. There is hope for the blacks, but not for the brown. They have lost the idea of doing anything for themselves. They have no history, no culture, no values, nothing.' Vistas of sadness opened up beyond these words. I thought of the tragedy of the coloured people in the rural areas where I had grown up, of the drunkenness and the social disintegration. I thought of the farm labourers' children with whom I had shared my childhood, of my excitement at the beginnings of a suntan: 'Mummy, look, I'm going brown from talking so much Afrikaans.' I considered the divergent paths of my life and theirs. Where were they now, Ollas and John and Boeta? Where was Wittes? Had they escaped the

cycle of poverty and violence? Were they still farm labourers, Shakespeare's rude mechanicals? Had they turned to *dagga* and mandrax? Or joined gangs? Jan's words had dislodged something in me. I needed to investigate his bold, half-drunk statement: *Die bruin mens is a mens vernietig*. Certainly, I was perfectly placed. One can hardly better the lower reaches of the Orange as a backdrop for the story of the San, the Nama and the Korana, the *trekboer*, the Griqua and the Baster, and the coloured people into whom they have merged.

I was just dozing off when Christopher sat up with a start. At first he thought Leon's cobra was slithering down his groundsheet. Then he realised it was water. The river had risen and flooded our camp. Christopher, Laurence and I spent the next hour drying our sleeping bags by Louwtjie's fire. The Unites, whose fancy blow-up mattresses had floated on the deluge, simply relocated to higher ground. Our boats, fortunately, were still in the shallows, drifting about like so many horses put out to grass.

II

I had expected interesting hydraulics at the meeting of the Orange and the Vaal. The confluence of these two great rivers, however, resembled nothing so much as a Y-shaped lake.

We stopped for tea and contemplation at this, the geographic centre of South Africa. I hauled my boat up onto the grassy verge and lay down in the sun. My lower back had been hurting throughout the morning session and Laurence had offered to massage it for me. As I lay on my front gazing up the Vaal, lulled by the sun and strong hands, and by the chatter of birds, I could scarcely tell which century I was in. The fat, lazy river rolled towards me much as it would have done in 1821, the year the Reverend Andrew Flood arrived at Canaan, a mission station on the banks of the Vaal. Flood, travelling from Cape Town by

ox wagon, forded the Orange just upstream of the confluence, and reached Canaan later that same day. He had come to spread the Word among the Korana and was now, so he wrote back to Cape Town, the last white man in his direction. It dawned on me, as Laurence gradually eased the tension from bunched muscles, that the Reverend Andrew Flood's story is, in essence, the story of the coloured people. For Flood and his descendants are the protagonists of *God's Stepchildren* (1924), Sarah Gertrude Millin's novel about race and racial mixing. The book takes its title from an encounter between the Reverend Flood and his servant Cachas. Flood observes that we are all God's children. But, asks Cachas, is God Himself not white? As Flood hesitates for a reply, she makes a suggestion: 'Perhaps we brown people are His stepchildren.' In an effort to convince himself and his congregation that all people are created equal, the Reverend Flood marries Cachas's daughter Silla. Millin considers the next four generations – Deborah, Kleinhans, Elmira and Barry – and the effect that their tragic flaw, which is to say their mixed blood, has on their moral and spiritual development.

The whole idea of mixed blood, mixed race, hybridity – call it what you will – is based on pseudo-scientific notions of race that have long since been discredited. As far as science is concerned, race is a meaningless word. Blackness, colouredness and whiteness exist of course, but as cultural categories, not biological ones. The genetic differences between the so-called races is minute (0.012%), far smaller than the average genetic difference between two members of the same race (0.2%). It makes more sense, scientifically speaking, to group people by body chemistry – resistance to malaria, for instance, or the ability to digest milk – than by the visible physical characteristics that are used to determine race. One such system would group Xhosas with Swedes, another the Khoisan with central Europeans. And yet, having said all this, I intend to use the language of race in this

book. For one thing, any discussion of coloured history and identity would be impossible without it. More importantly, ignoring it would be to deny, or at least to trivialise, the fact that racism is an everyday reality in South Africa. It would be more dangerous to not use the language of race, to slip into some parallel political universe where race is a nasty episode from our history, now thankfully past. Since I find myself in full retreat, I might as well admit to my discomfort at using the word coloured. It is an ugly word, imposed by outsiders on a diverse collection of peoples. There is no other term, though, that is so widely understood, that so readily identifies this segment of South African society. Many rural people still use the word, often in its Afrikaans form *kleurling*, to describe themselves. The urban elite generally reject it out of hand. Some call themselves *the so-called coloureds* or, with a further twist of irony, *the so-calleds*.

Miscegenation, the contaminating of pure with bad blood, is Millin's primary article of faith. Blood is a key word in *God's Stepchildren*. Kleinhans, the second generation, arrives in Kimberley and encounters an Afrikaner: 'They looked not so different as they stood there beside one another, the Boer and Kleinhans. But the blood of savages and sin ran in Kleinhans's veins.' Barry, the fourth generation, looks white, but has 'all this evil in his blood to hand on further.' Despite their best efforts to eliminate the black blood by drowning it in more and more white blood, a subtle degeneration persists in the line of Flood. 'And how should it be otherwise?' asks Millin. 'In his veins run, on one side, the blood of slaves; on the other side, the blood of the careless, the selfish, the stupid, the vicious.' To this list we might add the pathetic and the lonely – those anti-qualities exhibited by the Reverend Andrew Flood. Millin would almost certainly have endorsed Adolf Hitler's view that missionaries 'turn healthy, though primitive and inferior, human beings into a rotten brood of bastards.'

I was shocked by Millin's naked racism. Where, I wondered, had it come from? Millin was the oldest child of a Jewish merchant who emigrated from Lithuania in 1888. She was weaned, I imagine, on tales of Tsarist Russia, its racial intolerance. Growing up with her brothers at Waldeck's Plant diggings, Millin was acutely aware of her whiteness. 'Where I lived on the Vaal River,' she recalled later in life, 'among the remnants of tribes that had fought one another and the Boers in Voortrekker days, I saw drunkenness, disease, hunger and miscegenation.' By the age of seven, Millin was already considering 'which yellow child, never daring to approach its father, came from which white man.' She started to write about colour at the age of sixteen. Like so many immigrants – Napolean, Hitler, Verwoerd – she applied herself to her task with tragic zeal. The more I read about Millin, the more I came to realise that she was a child of her time, not so much undemocratic as predemocratic. At the time of its publication in 1924, *God's Stepchildren* was not the vulgar, hateful piece of work it is today, but rather a late flowering of nineteenth century rationalism and Social Darwinism. The publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 proved a shot in the arm for pseudo-scientific writings on race and human evolution. Francis Galton, the father of eugenics, popularised the belief that people with European blood occupied an advanced position on the evolutionary ladder. (Some of his ideas took shape during an 1851 tour of the territory north of the Orange. He studied the local tribes, ranking them according to their ascent from savagery.) Children of mixed race were seen as inferior hybrids, the mutant offspring of illicit contact between European purity and African savagery. Miscegenation was as an horrific prospect, claimed the eugenecists. It led to race degeneration and ultimately imperilled western civilisation.

While Millin does, on occasion, employ the science of race – two children of mixed descent are 'almost mathematically half-bred in

appearance' – her science retains a literary bent. For the true science of race one needs to turn to a book like George Findlay's *Miscegenation* (1936). 'In the present study,' the author tells us, 'I propose to consider white South Africa, how white it is, how long it is likely to remain white, and the effect of miscegenation on the quality of the people.' Findlay conceives of the coloured population as a bridge stretching between two pure stocks, the European and the Native. Coloured people are assigned a place on this bridge according to the fraction of their blood that is black: $^{1}/_{16}$, $^{1}/_{2}$, $^{31}/_{32}$ and so on. He introduces terms like quadroons-black and octoroons-black to supplement half-breed and quarter-breed. Working on the assumption of nine generations since Jan van Riebeeck's arrival, Findlay finds that 'the smallest fraction of alien blood that any person can today carry is one five hundred and twelfth.' The pseudo-science of race that informs Findlay's study, and permeates the work of Millin and others, remained valid intellectual currency well into the twentieth century. In the 1920s and 30s *God's Stepchildren* was used to vindicate white supremacy. The novel was a bestseller in the United States. Much of its readership, I imagine, came from the burgeoning far-right – the Ku-Klux-Klan had a membership of four million at the time. It was only in 1945, when the Nuremberg trials revealed to the world the horrors of Nazi race theory, that talk of blood and racial purity, of *ubermenschen* and slave races, started to wane. Except in South Africa, that is. A Cape Town magistrate claimed that the 1950 Amendment to the Immorality Act had been designed 'to prevent the mongrelization of the races.' Dr. Eben Donges cited *God's Stepchildren*, along with an essay by Olive Schreiner, in support of his Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. Which is not surprising, really, given the pair's views on the coloured people: 'He alone of all living creatures despises his own blood... If it were possible for him with red-hot pincers to draw out every ounce of flesh that was black man's and leave only white, in

most cases he would do it.' That was Schreiner; here is Millin: 'There must be something wrong at bottom. Look at their ancestry. It means a bad type of white man and a bad type of black woman to begin with... decent Kaffir women have nothing to do with white men.'

Reading *God's Stepchildren* is an often harrowing experience. It fortified me, though, for the crude racial thinking we would encounter on the river, thinking that still verges on applied biology. '*Ons is die mense met kort hare* - we are the people with the short hair,' says Petrus Vaalbooi, a Nama civic leader. 'Those with longer hair are the Basters. Below them is the Hotnot – the Nama – and then the Bushman at the lowest level. A light skin Baster is higher than a dark one. Above the Basters, another step higher, is another group which we call in the old language *afnaaitjies* [literally, those made by screwing]... Above them are whites. We had to call the white farmer *baas* - boss. When we prayed we were taught that God was to be called *Grootbaas* - Big Boss.' This version of Aristotle's Great Chain of Being – God, Europeans, recent European/Baster offspring, Basters, Khoi, San – could only have found expression along the dry reaches of the Orange.

Five pages into *God's Stepchildren* the Reverend Andrew Flood pores over a map of southern Africa. He traces the coastline up from Cape Town until his bony, slightly crooked finger rests on the mouth of a river. 'The Orange River,' he announces. 'They also call it the Black River, or, in the native language, the *Nu Gariep*.' He follows the river upstream to a tributary called the Yellow River, or *Gij Gariep*, and states, 'Somewhere about here I shall be.' Yes. Somewhere about here, here at the confluence of these two great courses of South African history, where I now lay as Laurence found knots and mercilessly kneaded them out. The Reverend Flood, incidentally, is not quite correct in his naming of the Orange. He would have benefitted from reading the botanist William Burchell's *Travels in the*

Interior of Southern Africa (1822-24), published during Flood's time at Canaan. Burchell informs us that the Khoi name *Gariep*, River or Great River, applied to the Orange below its confluence with the Vaal. The Orange above the confluence was called the *Nu-Gariep*, the Vaal the *Ky-Gariep*. Burchell chose, it seems, to ignore Robert Gordon's naming of the river in honour of the Dutch Prince of Orange in 1777. Though the majority of southern African explorers were men of action – officials, traders, hunters – it has been said of Burchell that he must be regarded as one of the most learned and accomplished travellers of any age or country. Burchell opens the account of his visit to the confluence in 1811 with a description of the members of his expedition. Of a certain Wantrouw, he writes at length: 'Although destiny seemed to have devoted him to a residence with the missionaries at Klaarwater, he soon took a dislike to the monotony of his prospects there: and from that time commenced a new æra of his life. Having already acquired some knowledge of zoology, (of botany he knew very little, and of entomology nothing at all,) he sighed for an opportunity of improving himself in that science; and in the hope of becoming acquainted with the interior of many rare and nondescript animals, he offered himself to me as the comparative anatomist to the expedition.' Wantrouw, it turns out, is Burchell's dog. Burchell suggests that an account of Wantrouw's travels might be published: 'A few coloured aquatina plates, or lithographic prints, should, by all means, be inserted; these his publisher could easily get designed by some artist, who must be told to take especial care that the words *Wantrouw delineavit*, or, *From a sketch by Wantrouw, Esq.* appear conspicuous at the bottom corner. Such a work, if rightly and humbly dedicated, and well advertised, would be sure to sell.'

On reaching the confluence, Burchell turns and heads up the Vaal. Here he observes a group of San, or Bushmen, ferrygliding across the river on swimming logs. While Burchell defends the simple

technology of the swimming log, pointing out that it is perfectly suited to the San's wandering lifestyle, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the Orange is probably the largest river on earth on which no craft more advanced than a floating log was used until the coming of the Europeans.

I was amazed to discover, that very afternoon, that there are still San living near the confluence. Aided by the joint flow of the Nu- and Ky-Garieps, we embarked, for the first time, on the Gariep proper. There was a strong headwind, and for two hours we had no choice but to firm our jaws and growl into the waves and spray. Then the wind subsided and the long pools gave way to a series of broad shallow rapids, not unlike the rapids of the Rio Grande one sees in cowboy movies, wanted men picking their way across horse in hand. Below one such rapid we came across two fishermen. Jakob and Noko were tiny. Jakob, in particular, had strong Khoisan features, yellowish skin, sharp wrinkled eyes, prominent cheekbones. They were friendly, talkative, yet also a little jumpy. I remember thinking to myself that they'd probably skived off work, slipped away from the boredom of the farm that must lie just over the rise, escaped to the world of the river. Noko

showed us the barbel he had caught. He asked how far we were going. Neither he nor Jakob seemed able to conceive of the end of the river, the sea into which it flowed. They asked me why we were doing this crazy thing. I told them I was writing a book about the river. Was I being paid to do this? No, I said. '*Oo, maar dis 'n* pretty mess,' said Noko, with a knowing smile. A pretty mess indeed. Laurence asked Jakob about the army fatigues he was wearing. '*Ons is Boesmans van Schmidtsdrif* - we're Bushmen from Schmidtsdrif.' This sounded interesting. We signalled to the others to stop for lunch, invited Jakob and Noko to join us. For the next hour they talked of the San of Schmidtsdrif, a tented village near the Vaal, fifty kilometres upstream of the confluence. In 1972 the !Xu and Khwe San people were chased out of Angola into Namibia by the MPLA, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola. Three years later Angola gained its independence from Portugal and the colonial war became a civil war. South Africa took the side of Jonas Savimbi's UNITA against the communist-backed MPLA. Many of the ousted San enlisted with the South African Defence Force, serving as both trackers and combatants. A friend of mine had been a medic in the feared 201 Battalion. Their badge was a *witborskraai* - white-chested crow. Its black body signified the fighting men, all San, and its chest the white core that commanded each platoon of thirty men – a commissioned officer, a two-line corporal and a medic. The MPLA were terrified of the San, who would sneak up on them and fight at close quarters. If a San soldier was killed, his friends would break rank and pursue the killer, for weeks if needs be.

South Africa left the fray when the Berlin Wall came down. There were fears of reprisals against the fighting San when SWAPO, an ally of the

MPLA, won Namibia's first democratic elections. The San were given the option of moving to South Africa. In 1990 some seven thousand members of the !Xu and Khwe communities arrived at Schmidtsdrif. They were promised houses within six months. Eleven years on and they are still, said Jakob, living in military tents.

I was struck by the irony of San people being brought to South Africa to secure their safety. Seen in the light of history, this borders on the surreal. Of all the blood-soaked episodes in South Africa's past, few rival the systematic and protracted extermination of the San as a people. They were seen as vermin by Boer and Baster, Xhosa and Khoi alike. Thousands of San were hunted down or, if they were lucky, enslaved: 'The capture of slaves from among this race of men is by no means difficult, and is effected in the following manner. Several farmers, that are in want of servants, join together, and take a journey to that part of the country where the *Boshies-men* live... the farmers will venture on a dark night to set upon them with six or eight people, which they contrive to do, by previously stationing themselves at some distance round about the *craal*. They then give the alarm by firing a gun or two. By this means there is such consternation spread over the whole body of these savages, that it is only the most bold and intelligent among them, that have the courage to break through the circle and steal off. These the captors are glad enough to get rid of at so easy a rate, being better pleased with those that are stupid, timorous and struck with amazement, and who consequently allow themselves to be taken and carried into bondage.' Thus Anders Sparrman in his *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and around the World, but chiefly into the country of the Hottentots and Caffres* (1783).

I visited Schmidtsdrif. From a swell in the landscape I looked down on hundreds of tents huddled together on a vast tract of northern Cape veld. It could have been an English camp in the Anglo-Boer War

– only the tents were brown, not white, and they hadn't been rigged with anything like military precision. On the outskirts of the settlement I met a man in army fatigues, hoeing the barren red ground outside his tent. He introduced himself as Dala and then, in shaky Afrikaans, pointed me to Sergeant Mattheus three tents down. Sergeant Mattheus, also in uniform, was sitting outside his tent, talking to a friend in the click language of the !Xu.

I had been under the impression that San languages were spoken only in the depths of the Kalahari – and then only for tourists and researchers. I was influenced, perhaps, by Herman Charles Bosman's joke that the San developed several new clicks when anthropologists showed an interest. Mattheus spoke reasonable Afrikaans, but wasted no time in directing me to Staff-sergeant Mahongo. There was a definite military pecking order at play. Mario Mahongo is Chairperson of the !Xu and Khwe Communal Property Association. In simpler times he would have been mayor. Mario told me that tented life has not been easy for the San. Unemployment, and the uncertainty of their

situation, have caused social problems – alcohol and elder abuse, teenage pregnancy. With no rights to hunt or gather on the land surrounding Schmidtsdrif, traditional San activities have gone into decline. Although nothing annoys Mario more than the view that he isn't a real Bushman because he doesn't hunt: '*As die jag klaar is, is die Boesman nie klaar nie* - the Bushman isn't finished when the hunt's finished.' Were his parents not already *verwester* - westernised, he asked, by the time he was born? Who dares label him somehow less Bushman for sitting behind a desk with a pair of spectacles and a cellular telephone?

I asked Mario whether he preferred the term San, Khoisan or Bushman. This is no easy question. The San have hunted and gathered throughout southern Africa for at least the past 40 000 years. When the first domestic animals appeared in northern Botswana around 2 000 years ago, some of these hunters changed their economy and became herders. In time, the herders came to use the name *Khoekhoe*, or Khoi, which means 'real people', in order to distinguish themselves from the hunters. These they called *Sonqua*, or San, which means 'people different from ourselves.' Some anthropologists use the portmanteau term Khoisan to describe the aboriginal peoples of southern Africa, arguing that there is little difference between the Khoi and the San. Historians resort to this term whenever they are unsure of the lifestyle of small yellow people who appear in the historical record. Driven south out of Botswana by stronger tribes, the Khoi trekked across the Kalahari to the confluence of the Orange and Vaal rivers. Some then continued south down river valleys to the coast. Others, according to oral tradition as recorded by Stow in his *The Native Races of South Africa* (1905), branched west along the Orange: 'The fugitive tribes fled towards the setting sun, and continued their flight until their progress in that direction was checked by the great waters in front of them, when they turned towards the

south, following the shores of the great waters, which always remained on the right hand.' Hugging their respective coasts, the two groups converged on the winter rainfall areas of the western Cape. By the time the Europeans arrived, Khoi tribes had established themselves throughout the sub-continent. These included the Einiqua downstream of the confluence, the Little Namaqua, or Nama, in Namaqualand, the Grigriqua and Gorachoqua nearer the Cape, and the Cochoqua who met Jan van Riebeeck when he landed in 1652. The Dutch settlers called these herders *Hottentots* in imitation of the babble in which they supposedly spoke. The people who hunted and gathered in the interior they called *Bossiesmans*, or Bushmen. I had heard, since both names are pejorative, that the San prefer to be called Bushman. 'No,' said Mario. 'Bushman carries too many negative connotations.' If an Afrikaner soldier and a San soldier were standing together, he explained, the former would be addressed by his surname, while the latter would be called *Boesman*. This scenario, I imagine, would also apply to farms and mines. The name Bushman, said Mario, is favoured today only by *kleurling kansvatters* - coloured chancers who are trying to cash in on the San's status as the first people of southern Africa.

Are the San the first people? I put this question to archaeologist Peter Beaumont of the McGregor Museum in Kimberley. It soon became

apparent that to answer this question is, in many ways, to consider how we all became human. Beaumont, all shiny eyes and mad Einstein hair, started at the beginning. Somewhere between five and seven million years before the present (BP) the human and ape lines diverged from a common ancestor. In 1924 Raymond Dart excavated the first early hominid, or erect ape, from the limeworks at Taung, some two hundred kilometres north-east of the Vaal-Orange confluence. It was the first clear affirmation of Darwin's suggestion that the human ancestor had evolved in Africa. Dart named his 3.5 million year old find *Australopithecus africanus*. The australopithecines were bipedal chimps, cultureless creatures with potbellies and minute skulls. Bipedalism meant that our ancestors moved relatively slowly and so had to rely on their social groups and on tools for defence. Stone tools were first used about 2.5 million years BP. These intentionally flaked river cobbles gave our ancestors an astonishing advantage. They were able to strip the meat off carcasses left by predators and smash open the bones to access marrow. This new energy-rich diet fuelled the expansion of their brains, an expensive organism in terms of metabolism. Larger brains led in turn to increasingly creative use of tools.

Our most successful ancestor, in terms of longevity, was *Homo erectus*. *Erectus* developed the handaxe and may also have been the first hominid to use fire. Bob Brain has dated the earliest hearth, in Swartkrans cave near Johannesburg, to 1.2 million years BP. He sees the use of fire as a crucial step in humanity's progressive manipulaton of nature. In particular, it gave the hominids the upper hand in their struggle against *Dinofelis*, a sabre-tooth cat that hunted them at night. Peter Beaumont suspects the Swartkrans hearth may have resulted from the regular use of accidental fire – a lightning-struck bush, for instance. He is hoping to show that fire was intentionally used one million years BP at his site, Wonderwerk Cave in the northern Cape.

Erectus branched into *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* and an early form of our species known as archaic *Homo sapiens*. Anatomically modern humans appeared roughly 100 000 years BP and carry the label *Homo sapiens sapiens* - wise wise human, courtesy of the Swedish naturalist Carl von Linné. He is better known as Linnaeus, since his system of biological classification was published in scholarly Latin. Linnaeus, incidentally, excludes the San from the species *sapiens*, labeling them *Homo monstrosis*, a category he reserved for 'hairy men with tails and other travellers' confabulations.'

The emergence of art was a significant milestone in human evolution. Symbolic thought led to language and culture. Innovation was shared and became a routine part of human life, rather than something which occurred every thousand years or so. Facing this kind of competition, the Neandertals drifted into extinction. It is worth noting that human evolution has not been a steady march from proto-ape to modern human. At any given time there may have been several species of hominid present. Many headed down evolutionary dead-ends in a process akin to an elimination dance. One and a half million years ago, the master of ceremonies turned down the music and announced, 'Would those with large molars and heavy jaws please leave the floor? Yes, that would be you, *Australopithecus robustus*.' This southern African hominid had adapted to a vegetarian diet that required much chewing – specialisation, unfortunately, permits no turning back. Thirty thousand years ago the music dipped again: 'Okay, quiet please...if abstract thought is beyond you, please come in. Would somebody fetch *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* – I don't think she understood that.'

A group of anatomically modern humans left Africa in a period of great aridity 50 to 70 000 years BP. Genetic evidence shows that the entire population of Europe is descended from seven African females – in fact every human being alive today carries the

mitochondrial DNA of a single African female. She lived 10 000 generations ago and has been dubbed the African Eve. Conventional wisdom holds that hominids became behaviourally human only once they left the dark continent. In the course of the past decade, however, many early behavioural trajectories have been traced to Africa. If art and ritual burial are taken as markers, then our ancestors displayed modern human behaviour long before their arrival in Europe 40 000 years BP. Chris Henshilwood has shown that at Blombos cave humans were engraving geometric patterns on pieces of red ochre over 75 000 years BP. It seems fitting, somehow, that here, at the very southern tip of Africa, one of our ancestors should have looked out off the edge of the continent that gave birth to humanity and had some inkling of her separateness from the world.

While there are as many theories as there are paleo-specialists, it is now widely accepted that modern humans evolved in Africa. Indeed, it is beginning to look, despite the mystique of the Leakey family and the concentration of research in the easy-to-date ashfalls of East Africa, as if modern humans first emerged in southern Africa. A recent genetic survey of the Khoisan people supports this hypothesis. They are, of all living populations, genetically closest to the pre-migratory African stock. Mario Mahongo is well within his rights to claim that the San are the first people of southern Africa. It appears they're the first people of the planet.

Peter Beaumont believes modern humans arose in southern Africa 250 000 years ago. 'But,' he says, 'we're a long way from

showing that.' Beaumont points to the northern Cape's incredible record of human occupation. There are several sites where the number of artifacts exceeds a million. Canteen Koppie, near the Vaal-Orange confluence, has an estimated one hundred million stone artifacts, while the preliminary figure for a Stone Age workshop at an outcrop of banded ironstone near Kathu is a staggering ten billion. One can easily pick up a thousand artifacts a day there. East African sites count in tens. One would be lucky to find a handaxe per week in the Thames valley. The sheer size and density of the northern Cape sites suggest that a significant proportion of the world's population once lived there. It may be that early humans chose the dry upland plateau of southern Africa to get away from the diseases and shorter lives of wetter climes. Once there, they would have gravitated to springs, and to the only perennial river draining this thirstland. Peter Beaumont leaned back in his chair and said with a twinkle, 'The Orange may well have flowed through the Garden of Eden.'

Soon after leaving Jakob and Noko we entered a gorge, its steep dustgreen slopes topped by sheer rock – red, vertical, looming. Though not as lush as received notions of Eden, this majestic cleft would have afforded a fine home to the African Eve. The rapids narrowed and bucked, swept us downriver. We set up camp at the base of Witsloot Canyon, a deeply incised watercourse on the north bank. Like all the Orange's tributaries between the Vaal and the sea, though, it was a case of fall into the river and dust yourself off. Felix rigged his director's chair, sat down to plot our position. The GPS handheld receiver found three satellites and triangulated our position, correct, it claimed, to eight metres. 'Davey,' called Felix, 'could you get me a piece of grass? I want to be accurate today.' Felix hunched over the map, folding the grass along the river's meanders. He

straightened it out and held it against the scale at the bottom of the map. 'Fifty-eight clicks,' he announced, 'not bad for a headwind.' Peter and Dave slipped off for an afternoon nap. They paddled hard, these old men, slept hard too. Chris talked Felix into a smoke. 'Depravity,' he informed us, 'loves company.' My back was still bothering me. Laurence suggested some yoga. We did dogstretch-with-the-face-down to loosen the hamstrings, and Faeq's floor sequence to release the sciatic nerve, easily pinched in a kayak.

Laurence hoisted me off the ground for an extended back-bend. I was pleased Felix wasn't around to witness this lot. He suffers from a degenerative back disease and is in constant pain in a kayak. In the late 1980s he drank a half-jack of whiskey each night to dull the pain; now he took elephant-numbing suppositories. Not once had he mentioned his back.

'*Wil julle roei of wil julle suip?*' We had set off at eight, early for us, and were making good time on the lazy meanders between Douglas and Prieska when this offer boomed out across the water – 'do you want to row or do you want to drink?'

'*Ons wil suip*,' yelled Chris and almost capsized in his haste to turn around and find the owner of the voice.

'*Waar is julle vandaan?*'

'Orania.'

'*Oraaania… houtkoppe van Oraania?* - woodheads from Orania?' We could hear his mind whirring as he tried to reconcile our patently English accents with the Afrikaner volkstaat.

'No, no… we started paddling in Orania, but we're from Cape Town.'

'*Ah… souties.*' Afrikaners call English-speaking South Africans *soutpiele*, salt dicks. They see us doing the splits – one foot in South Africa, one foot in England, penis hanging in the sea. They informed us that *souties* don't drink.

'We're a new breed of *soutie*,' ventured Laurence. 'But we've got no beer with us, only whisky to save space.' When this effort fell flat, we realised that their initial invitation to drink had been mere banter.

A torrent of abuse tumbled down the bank. '*Ja, ons is donderse Engelsmanne* - yes, we're bloody Englishmen,' yelled Peter. This entirely disarmed the merry little band. Heaving themselves from their deckchairs, they gambolled down to the water's edge like a troupe of circus bears. They were local farmers enjoying a riverine Sunday on the farm Wouterspan. One of them had motored downstream on the pontoon to which we now docked. Some animated conversation followed, before we left triumphant, Chris brandishing a bottle of Richelieu. He used the cap to dole out shots as we floated downstream. I took off my hat, allowed the sun and brandy to wash over my head, roll down my shoulders. 'Thank goodness for the businessmen and the bankers,' said Felix. 'They keep the world going around. Without them we wouldn't be able to live the lives we do, we wouldn't be here on this river right now.' I couldn't make out whether he was being serious or not. No sooner had we stowed the Richelieu, than we came across another bank party, this time on the farm De Hoek. They invited us ashore for beers. While the others took up their offer, I set off to look at the hinterland. I emerged from the trees into a

furnace glare of stony grey veld. The temperature must have shot up fifteen degrees. I surveyed the shrubs and koppies, pressed flat by white heat, for all of twenty seconds, then hurried back to the trees and sprinkler-cooled buildings. I was happy to be on the river on a day like this.

We had, that festive morning, passed the spot where a steamboat named *The Queen and Czar* encountered the settlement of Klaarwater in 1854. Here the steamboat, which had travelled upstream from the Orange River mouth, turned north up the Kuruman River and sailed on to Lattakoo, the most northerly of the Cape mission stations. The steamer's progress was not hindered by the fact that Klaarwater, today called Griquatown, is fifty kilometres from the river, nor by the fact that the Kuruman River flows into the Molopo, which only joins the Orange below the Augrabies Falls, nor indeed by the fact that the Orange is unnavigable. For *The Queen and Czar* steams her way through *Meridiana: the adventures of three Englishmen and three Russians in South Africa* (1872), a little-known novel by Jules Verne. The six foreigners of the title are astronomers, come to measure an arc of the meridian in southern Africa. They have the obligatory run-ins with hippos, crocs, elephants and lions before fleeing the assegais of a native horde with the scientific results they have risked their lives for. Remarkably, they find a river that carries them from the central Kalahari to the Zambezi and on to the Indian Ocean. *Meridiana*, along with better-known works such as *Around the World in Eighty Days*, is one of fifty-four novels by Verne collectively known as *Voyages Extraordinaires.* Given this prodigious output, I don't suppose one can blame Verne for letting simple geographical facts stand in the way of a good story. It surely doesn't count in his favour, though, when the real

story of Klaarwater proves far more compelling than his ludicrous fiction.

Close to where the *Queen and Czar* turned to port and steamed off across the veld is a ford named Read's Drift. This is where the Reverends John Campbell and James Read crossed the Orange in 1813. Though the river was 'broad as the Thames at London Bridge, being also deep and rapid,' they reached the north bank with their quota of oxen intact. Campbell, a director of the London Missionary Society, was on a tour of their southern African stations. He depicts himself, in the frontispiece to his *Travels in South Africa* (1815), as a funny little man with an umbrella standing on the banks of the Gariep. Campbell passed through William Anderson's mission at Klaarwater *en route* to Lattakoo. Two months later he returned to Klaarwater and began ringing the changes: 'The people in this part, being a mixed race, went by the name of Bastards; but having represented to the principal persons the offensiveness of the word to an English or Dutch ear, they resolved to assume some other name. On consulting among themselves... they resolved hereafter to be called Griquas. In the evening there was thunder, but no rain.' The rebranding of a people costs Campbell little more ink than climatic ephemera. He changed the name of the settlement from Klaarwater to Griquatown

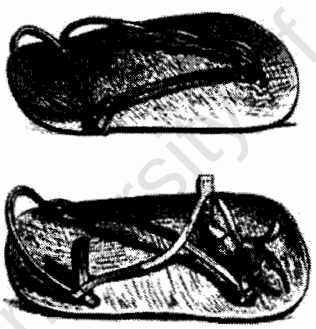
and then dashed off a constitution of thirteen clauses, explaining that 'in the history of the world there was no account of any people existing and prospering without laws.' Having laid the foundations of the Griqua state, Campbell headed downstream for the mission stations of Namaqualand. He stopped to explain his laws at every Khoisan and Baster settlement he encountered. One group, reports Campbell, had left the Klaarwater mission 'quietly to enjoy a plurality of wives.'

The story of the Griqua people is closely connected to the Orange River. Its telling, however, requires some knowledge of the people of 'mixed race' to whom Campbell refers. A popular saying has it that a handful of Hollanders waded ashore on 6 April 1652, and the coloured people emerged nine months later. The employees of the Dutch East India Company who landed at Woodstock beach that fateful day had orders only to dig a garden, to grow potatoes and onions, spinach and pumpkin for the passing fleet. They chose, it seems, to misunderstand these orders. By 1657 the first freeburghers had settled along the banks of the Liesbeek River. Slaves were imported the following year. The seeds were sown, not only for vegetables to combat scurvy on passing ships, but for the colonisation of southern Africa. Within two decades liaisons between the Europeans, the slaves and the Khoi had indeed given rise to a population of mixed origin. With white women at something of a premium – there were only seventeen of them in 1663 – the slave lodge served as a brothel for garrison soldiers and passing sailors. During the first twenty years of colonial rule three quarters of the children born to female slaves had white fathers. Mentzel, a visitor to the Cape in the eighteenth century, observed that 'towards evening one can see a string of sailors and soldiers entering the Company's lodge where they mis-spend their time until the clock strikes nine... the Company does nothing to prevent this promiscuous intercourse, since, for one thing it tends to multiply the slave population, and does away

with the necessity of importing fresh slaves.' One reads, elsewhere in the historical record, of farmers reproducing their own labour force, and of Irishmen being employed as studs to whiten the slave stock. Sex across the colour line not only provided an outlet for the loneliness and desires of company employees, but also came to be a business venture that helped prop up the colonial economy. Mentzel goes on to say that 'three or four generations of admixture – for the daughters follow their mothers' footsteps – have produced a half-caste population, a mestizzo class.'

While the company tolerated these sexual relations, they enforced the rule of uterine descent to limit the blurring of racial and social boundaries. J.S. Marais suggests in *The Cape Coloured People* (1937) that this agenda was perfectly realised: 'Thus did the Boers keep their own race pure and bring into existence a nation of half-breeds.' This statement cannot go unchallenged. Even if the biological concept of race were valid, no population would be racially pure. Consider, for instance, the opening line of Trevelyan's *History of England* (1926): 'It is a commonplace to say that the British are a people of mixed blood.' George Findlay, author of *Miscegenation* (1936), concluded that 38% of the people classified white in the Cape 'carry the taint of colour.' Simon van der Stel, an early governor of the colony, would have been coloured in the apartheid era. Indeed, every old Cape settler family has genealogical connections to coloured families. This includes me. My mother's family dates back to the arrival of the French Huguenot Jacques Therond in 1692. One, or more, of my ancestors may well have come from Ternatan, Macassar, Ambon, Bali or Padang in the Indonesian Archipelago, from Malabar, Bengalen, Tranquebar or Peshur in British India, from Ceylon or De La Goa, Mozambique or Madagascar. Marais's claim of racial purity is ludicrous. We're all coloured.

Novelist Etienne le Roux characterises his people as 'a real bastard race with that mongrel toughness.' Certainly, if one is to play the racial game, the Afrikaners are as creole as their language. Four years after his arrival at the Cape, Jan van Riebeeck reported that the Khoi were speaking the Dutch language reasonably well, especially the children. Thirty years later Commissioner van Rheede found that they spoke it 'in their manner, rather brokenly and unintelligibly, so that we imitate them in this and since especially our children have taken over this habit, a broken language has come into being which will be impossible to eradicate.' This broken language, known at first as Hottentots-Hollands and later as Cape Dutch, is the Afrikaans of today. The Afrikaners are indebted to the Khoi not only for biltong and *velskoen* - shoes made of hide, but for the very tenor their language, its earthiness and expressiveness.



فامیجین اِنَّتَ حَمِیدٌ مَجِیدٌ قَادِرِتْ

اُوقْ اِسْ خَیرِیتْس اِتْ اِسْ خُرُوفْ

اَللّٰهُمَّ بَارِكْ یَا اللّٰهُ فِرْمِیرْ یِمَانْ قْ

Other researchers suggests Afrikaans isn't home-grown at all. They argue that Muslim slaves and political prisoners brought a Dutch patois with them from the East Indies. Indeed, the first written Afrikaans is in Arabic script – translations from the Qur'an, codes of conduct for Cape *Muslims. Whichever argument one subscribes to, it's clear that the* peoples who would later be lumped together under the label coloured played a central role in the development of the Afrikaans language.

In the eighteenth century people of mixed race were called *Bastaards* or *vannie Kaap* - from the Cape. The descendants of European-slave liaisons tended to join the Cape Muslim community, and became known as Malays or *slamse*, a corruption of Islam. The term Bastard thus came to apply more and more to the offspring of European-Khoi liaisons. Despite the early precedent set by the marriage of Pieter van Meerhof to Eva, Jan van Riebeeck's Khoi interpreter, European-Khoi unions took place chiefly on isolated farms. Robert Gordon reports that of the nineteen farmers in northern Namaqualand in 1779, five were married, while the rest had 'mostly a Hottentot woman or two, whom they marry in their fashion.' The term Bastard, over time, took on a cultural dimension. It was used to describe any indigenous persons who spoke low Dutch, wore European clothes and generally behaved like the colonists, whether they had white blood or not. There was thus a certain overlap between *Bastaard* and *Oorlam*, the name given to westernised Khoi on the borders of the colony. Most Bastards, not surprisingly, found this name offensive. It drew attention, though, to their white blood, raising their station in colonial society, and so they rallied around the variant Baster. The Basters considered themselves 'swarthy Hollanders.' The colonists considered them half-breeds. As the supply of women from Europe improved, Baster children were usurped by their white siblings. 'The white children of the colonists,' observed Henry Lichtenstein, 'did not hesitate to make use of the right of the strongest, and to drive their half yellow relations out of the places where they had their fixed abodes. These Bastaards were then obliged to seek an asylum in more remote parts, till at length, driven from the Sack River, as they had been before from the Bokkeveld, nothing remained for them but to retreat to the Orange River.' Many Basters, looking to escape the racial prejudices of the colony, sought independence beyond its borders. Groups led by Adam Kok, Claas Barends and Jager

Afrikaner migrated north, reaching, eventually, the banks of the Orange. One community, led by Hermanus Van Wyk, trekked on, deep into Namibia, where they are still known today as the Rehoboth Basters. These *voor-voortrekkers* pioneered South Africa's northern frontier. By the early nineteenth century they had established several embryonic coloured states north of the Great River.

Adam Kok was the founding father of the Griqua people. He only received this appelation after his death and much of his story is shrouded in folklore. He was a manumitted slave, and may formerly have been a ship's cook or chef to Governor Tulbagh. By the middle of the eighteenth century Kok had established himself as a successful stock farmer in the Piketberg region, a hundred miles north of Cape Town. Here he came into contact with remnants of the *Chariguriqua* or */Karihuri* Khoi tribe. Ravaged by the smallpox epidemic of 1713 and dispossessed of their land, they attached themselves to this wealthy pastoralist. Kok came under increasing pressure from white farmers who wanted his land. He abandoned his grazing rights in 1771 and trekked north with his entourage, first to the Hantam and then the Kamiesberg in northern Namaqualand. He fathered seven sons and an unspecified number of daughters. The major activity of the Koks during these years was hunting for ivory along and beyond the Great River. They were a powerful force in the area and for many years the only family in Namaqualand with a wagon. Adam mediated in local Nama-San violence, and the company presented him with a staff of office in recognition of his authority. Dispossed Basters, runaway slaves and other fugitives from justice and injustice flocked north to join him. One such character, Claas Barends, married one of Adam's daughters. In the 1780s, under pressure again from advancing whites, the Bastards, as they called themselves, migrated east along the Great River.

Adam died in 1795. His staff of office passed to his son Cornelius, whom a local *veldwachtmeester* - freeburgher militia officer called his 'one great help.' The law-abiding communities on a frontier, though, generally fare less well than the lawless. Guns and horses, which is to say the technology of colonial society, gave Baster and Oorlam gangs on the northern frontier an advantage over indigenous people. They behaved much like the colonists, sending out commandos to pacify any San, Nama, Einiqua, Korana or Tswana people who resisted their progress. Jager Afrikaner rode at the head of one such marauding band. He established himself on the islands near Augrabies Falls and sent out plundering parties against anyone in reach, including the Koks and Barends. The company offered Barend Barends, son of Claas, a reward for the capture of Jager in 1798, and running battles ensued along the banks of the Gariep. Jager started to get the upper hand and forced Barends further east. When William Anderson of the London Mission Society crossed the Orange in 1801, he found Barends at Rietfontein near Prieska. The Koks were downstream at their kraal Bitterdagga.

For three years Anderson accompanied the Barends clan on their perennial search for pasture. They put up with him, most likely, because of his ability to negotiate with the company for gunpowder. In 1804 Anderson persuaded his congregation to settle near the springs at Klaarwater and plant crops. Adam Kok's sons gradually joined them. At the time of Campbell's visit in 1813, the Bastards of Klaarwater were still, to some extent, swarthy Hollanders. When he changed their name to Griqua, though, a word that stressed their Khoiness rather than their descent from the colonists, racial distinctions began to break down. In time the Griquas became *onze natie* - our nation, a diverse community of Basters, Oorlams and slaves from the colony, and Khoi, San and Tswana from beyond its borders. It's refreshing to encounter a South African identity based more on

individual choice than genetic determination. This choice, though, has resulted in Griqua identity meaning different things to different people. In Adam Kok's day the Griquas were Basters. A later chief, Andries Waterboer, talked of 'us white people.' The South African Native Affairs Commission of 1905 defined Griquas as 'a people of mixed Hottentot and slave descent with an infusion of white blood,' while subsequent administrations couldn't decide whether the Griquas were coloured or black. It is inevitable, perhaps, that a people who shaped their identity on the Orange River frontier, should find themselves at the borderline of African and European tradition. Today, riding a wave of fashionable indigeneity, the Griquas emphasise their Khoisan roots. And who can blame this quintessentially South African people for their fluid, somewhat opportunist, adaption to their environment?

In 1814 the Cape government ordered the Griquas to provide twenty recruits for the Cape Corps. They revolted against this inroad on their independence, and their affairs remained unsettled for several years. In 1820 the missionaries, in need of docile subjects, engineered the election of Andries Waterboer. This former mission school teacher now enjoyed the same status as the heriditary chiefs Adam Kok II and Barend Barends. Kok moved to nearby Campbell, while Barends trekked fifty miles north to Daniëlskuil. Those Griquas prepared to submit to colonial control remained in Griquatown. The three groups drifted apart, though they did join forces in 1823 to help the Batlhaping, under Mothibi and their missionary Robert Moffat, resist an attack on Kuruman by tribes displaced as a result of Shaka's activities in the east. This battle may have been the occasion of the following prayer, attributed to 'the Griqua Koq':

> O, Lord!
> Tomorrow we shall again be fighting a battle that is
> truly great. With all our might we need Your help
> and that is why I must tell You something: This battle

> tomorrow is going to be a serious affair. There will be no place for children. Therefore I must ask you not to send your son to help us. Come Yourself.

Despite the success of the Griqua commando, old animosities flared up once the threat of invasion had passed. Supporters of the old chiefs formed the Bergenaars, a marauding band of San, Korana and disaffected Griquas. The mountain-dwelling Bergenaars can, at a push, be seen as political dissidents, true to the Baster ideal of carving out an independent existence north of the Great River. When the Bergenaars raided a Korana kraal, Andries Waterboer went after them with a commando. He captured six Bergenaars, five of them members of prominent Griqua families. After a hasty trial in the schoolhouse, they were hanged, at 4 p.m. that same day, from the bough of a giant Syringa.

I visited the execution tree in Griquatown. Its vast canopy gives shade to the back yard of a peach-coloured home. Which bough had the hangman used? I took a few steps back, crunching fleshy orange seeds underfoot. Had the Bergenaars' shoes twitched in one straight line, I wondered, or had they turned, slowly, this way and that, two to a branch? A woman appeared on the porch. She informed me that this building was *Die Paleis* - The Palace and that Captain Johannes Jacobus Waterboer lived here: '*Hy sit nou twee jaar in die stoel* - he's been in the chair for two years now.' The Palace was the seat of the Waterboer captaincy for 130-odd years – until the apartheid government expelled non-whites from the town. Johannes's grandfather Nikolaas moved to the coloured location. In the late 1990s, so the woman told me, the ANC government bought the house back from *die blankes* - the whites, returned it to the Waterboers. That afternoon, after being sworn to secrecy in a quiet corner of Louis Liquor store, I heard whispers of election bribery.

I left the Palace, set off in search of the 'Monument to Waterboer, Griqua Chief.' I had seen it listed, along with other attractions, on a sign welcoming me to this 'Pioneer Town north of the Orange River.' My search took me past streets named Moffat, Livingstone, Burchell. I eventually found the monument on a patch of gravel fringed with dry grass. It consists of a stone plinth flanked by two cannons. A plaque gives the years of Andries's captaincy, 1820 to 1852. He was presented with the cannons in the name of Queen Victoria, or, in the Griqua patois of today, *ou Mies Kwien Viktorie.*

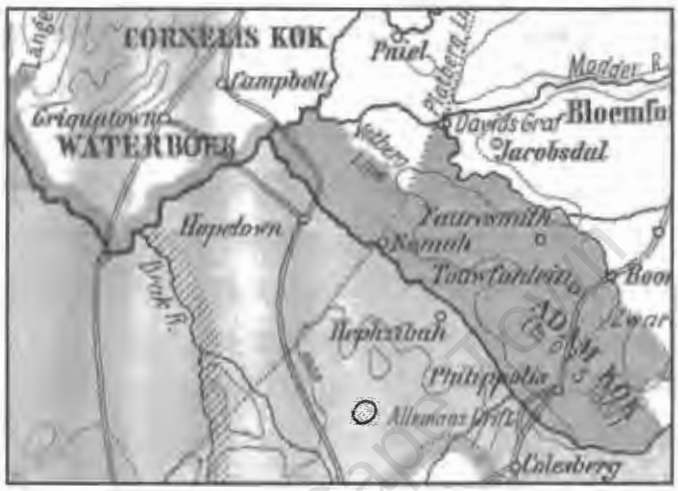
Waterboer mounted the cannons outside the Palace. Their mighty boom, followed by the clatter of scrap-iron, scared off the bravest of San raiders.

Although Andries Waterboer had a reputation for severity, he was, by all accounts, an educated and just man. He built the Griqua nation by taking remnants of disrupted San, Korana and Sotho-Tswana tribes under his wing. He introduced coinage and a flag, and used the civilising mission of the church to further their prospects. 'The Griquas,' wrote David Livingstone, 'come to church in decent though poor clothing and behave with a decorum certainly superior to what seems to have been the case in the time of Mr. Samuel Pepys in London.' The British Government recognised Waterboer's capabilities and supplied him with powder and shot, albeit on a strict ration. In return, he held the northern border. This arrangement formalised the old pattern of Basters as second-class Europeans, useful as pioneering frontiersmen and as buffers against hostile Khoisan and Bantu peoples, but always in danger of losing their land when the Europeans advanced.

The Griquas under Barend Barends did not fare well. In 1826 Barends moved to Boetsap on the Harts River and took to plundering every black community in reach. In 1831 the Griquas joined forces with Bergenaars, Korana and Sotho-Tswana and attacked one of Mzilikazi's outposts. Mzilikazi and his Ndebele warriors had crossed the Drakensberg from Natal to escape the bloody rise of the Zulu kingdom under Shaka. They spread out across the highveld, setting into motion a wave of dispossession and forced migration known as the *Difaqane* - the scattering. By the time the Ndebele reached present-day Pretoria, their numbers had swelled and they had accumulated vast herds of cattle. It was these herds Barends was after. At the time of his offensive the Ndebele were themselves away on a plundering expedition, and he made off with four thousand head of cattle. For two days the Griquas looked over their shoulders. Then they relaxed, not realising that it was Mzilikazi's practice to attack on the third day, when his enemies believed themselves to be out of reach. An Ndebele impi surrounded the Griqua camp and attacked at dawn. Many Griquas were pinned to the ground by spears. Those that escaped the initial assault faced encircling warriors. Gazing upon the scene of the massacre some years later, a member of Andrew Smith's expedition noted that the slope was still white with the bones of men and horses.

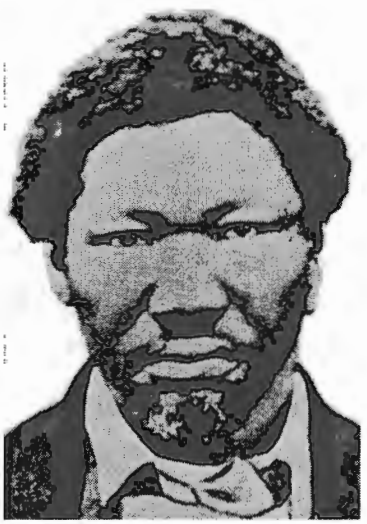
Adam Kok, responding to the irresistable momentum of Griqua history, pressed further up the Orange. He left Campbell in the charge of his brother Cornelius II and trekked to Philippolis, a short distance upstream of where Orania is today. Adam agreed on a boundary with Andries Waterboer and had his territory ratified by the Governor of the Cape. The Philippolis Griquas had run-ins with frontier farmers who crossed the Orange to graze their herds. When slavery was abolished in 1834, these farmers found themselves deprived of cheap labour. Their discontent sparked an epic migration into the interior. They

trekked not only to be free of British government, but also, in the words of their leader Piet Retief, 'to preserve proper relations between masters and servants.' The Great Trek would, in time, force the Griquas to embark on an heroic journey of their own.



At first the long line of wagons fording the Orange headed north and east for the open land beyond the frontier. When the British annexed Natal, however, a number of Voortrekkers retraced their steps into Griqua territory. The British then annexed the land between the Orange and the Vaal. The Griquas and the Boers were once again British subjects. The Boers rebelled, and Sir Harry Smith rushed north, making military history by crossing the Orange on inflatable india-rubber floats. The Griquas helped Smith quell the uprising, only to be betrayed by the British, who now found it politically expedient to sign away the land between the rivers to the Boers. By 1860, Adam III and his *Raad* were faced with three options: move, fight or become servants to the Free State farmers. The British not only reneged on a treaty of support, but informed the Griquas that in the event of an armed struggle they would cut off their supply of ammunition from the Cape. This fiercely independent people was forced to trek.

In an epic and neglected voyage of the South African interior, Adam Kok III led 2 000 people and 20 000 head of stock on a two year journey over the Drakensberg to Nomansland, an area depopulated during Shaka's wars. Beating off attacks from Basuto cattle raiders, this column of people, animals, donkey carts and ox-wagons made their serpentine way up to three thousand metres above sea level, now over grass and snow and smooth exfoliating granite, now skirting an escarpment or cutting and blasting their way through an outcrop of rock with crowbars and gunpowder. They crossed the Senqu, the headwaters of the Orange, a river that had been central to the Griqua quest for independence ever since Adam Kok the first encountered its lower reaches in Namaqualand. Early in 1863, their stock decimated by steep ravines and severe winters, the Griquas descended on their promised land. Once again – for it was the British that had offered them this territory – the promise proved false. They found themselves acting as a buffer between colonist and Xhosa. They settled at Kokstad and gradually established their authority over the Xhosa to the south. As the territory became safer, white traders and farmers to the north came to covet their land. In a move that amounted to annexation in all but name, Adam Kok III's responsibilities were taken over by the British Resident for Transkei. When Kok died in a cart accident in 1875 his cousin delivered a graveside oration: 'He is the last of his race. After him there will be no coloured king or chief in Colonial South Africa.' And there hasn't been – certainly no one with the stature or following of Jager Afrikaner, Adam Kok, or Andries Waterboer.



Four years later the Griqua land was formally annexed and, now that it was no longer theirs, named East Griqualand. Smith Plommer led a brief rebellion, and was beheaded for his efforts. The soldier who shot him, so the story goes, took the price on his head literally. Griqua pride dwindled along with their independence. Speculators appeared on the scene and there are tales of farms being bought for as little as a case of gin. A similar fate of dispossession and decline was unfolding deep in the interior, in Griqualand West. Initially Griquatown escaped the pressures that had been exerted on Philippolis, as the surrounding land was of poor quality. Then diamonds were discovered between the Orange and the Vaal. The British suddenly chose to listen to David Arnot, a lawyer who for years had been trying to safeguard Griqua territory against Orange Free State encroachment. The disputed territory, which included Kimberley, was awarded to the Griquas – only for the British, surprise surprise, to annex Griqualand West soon thereafter. This was the new age of colonialism, after all, an era which inspired Cecil John Rhodes to announce: 'I would annex the planets if I could.'

On the first day of our trip we had been paddling past the farm Ramah, when Chris Roux sped out to meet us in an inflatable boat – the great-great-grandprogeny, I suppose, of Sir Harry's military floats. He had been patrolling the banks for a troop of baboons that was stripping and ringbarking his pecan trees. Chris told us that the Ramah-Platberg Line, the hastily drawn border that robbed the Orange Free State of the Kimberley diamonds, ran through his house. In the diamond days, smugglers would retreat from the kitchen to the living room to escape the jurisdiction of an inspector at the front door. Chris drew our attention to the farm names immediately before and after the border. I looked at our map. Baviaanskrantz, Kalkplaat and Zoutpansdrif suddenly become Donnybrook, New Waterford, Londonderry and Roscommon. Nikolaas Waterboer, son of Andries,

sold the farms along the Ramah-Platberg Line to an Irish contingent of the 1820 settlers. The Irish were to act as a buffer against possible Free State reprisals. This border chicanery, while it shows that the Griquas had learnt a trick or two from the British, did nothing to restore their mineral rights. The diamonds have become yet another episode in a past to which the Griquas cling: 'We are the bones of Adam Kok. We are people with a history.'

We were trawling the banks that evening, looking for a flat spot to camp, when we rounded a bend in the river. Ahead of us was a long reach, and at the end of it, lit from behind by the late afternoon sun, a small pink sail. Dave and Felix powered ahead – Dave because he preferred paddling to camping, Felix because of the promise of that distant pink glitter. The Loots children were windsurfing in front of their home. We met their father Dirk on the bank – tall, athletic, bearded. He invited us to camp on his lawn that night. We bathed in his reservoir, our bodies gold in the last few minutes of sun, swallows swooping for water. We settled down to beer and a feast of red meat. I was telling Dirk about Leon the poacher when he cut in: '*Leon de Goede, ons soek hom nie meer hier nie* - he's not welcome around here any more.' Here, on the farm Zwemkuil, a hundred kilometres downstream from where we had met him, we were able to corroborate Leon's unlikely story. He barters his meat for sugar and coffee with farm labourers, said Dirk. He knows the river well, sleeps on the islands. Judging by Dirk's outburst, Leon shoots more than just carp and duiker.

We unrolled our sleeping mats on the Loots' thick pile lawn. As my companions fell asleep around me, I lay thinking of the Griquas and their story, the tragedy of it, the inevitability. Pete was snoring gently off to my left. And then, without warning, I knew what my book

needed to do. It needed to dispel the myth that the coloured people have no history of their own, a myth carefully fostered by the colonists to justify their supremacy. What is the story of the Griquas, I thought, if not a story of coloured people making history? And not just their own history, but an alternative course the whole country might have followed. How different South Africa might have been had the Griquas managed to defend the Orange against the advancing whites – and been able to establish a multi-ethnic state based less on the racial exclusion of the colony and more on the frontier ethos of absorption and inclusion.

A frontier is a region where different traditions meet, but where none of them is able to establish their authority. W. K. Hancock describes the frontier that once existed between England and Scotland as 'not a line but a district where thieving Scot and thieving Englishman had sufficient liberty for roving forays.' Frontiers are usually disputed, places of uncertainty, of shifting identity. Who are you, as you ride over the horizon? Who do you want to be, as you appear before strangers? If you want support, you stress commonality; if you want to fight, you stress difference. F. J. Turner, historian of the American west, likens a frontier to 'the outer edge of a wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilisation.' To run with this metaphor for a moment: the wave of civilisation swamped some groups on the Orange River frontier, the Einiqua, for instance, and the Korana; but it also gave rise to new groups, such as the Griquas, the Basters and the Oorlams, who each forged an identity from elements of European and African tradition.

There are strong parallels between the American west and the South African north-west: the landscape of mesas and buttes and wide open plains, of thornbush and succulent and clear desert air; the frontier zone with its hunters and explorers and gentleman travellers, missionaries and misfits, rogues and runaways, outlaws and peace-

loving families in wagons; the rushes at Klondike and Kimberley and the Witwatersrand; the massacre of springbok and buffalo, and of native peoples armed with bows. As I lay gazing down at the silver line of the Orange, the moon playing on the reach we had paddled that afternoon, I realised that even this river, so central to any narrative of the arid north-west, has a counterpart – indeed, a namesake – in the Rio Grande, the Great River of the American west. The Orange was the northern border of the Cape Colony for two thousand kilometres, the Grande for two thousand kilometres the border between Texas and Mexico. Outlaws were forever trying to reach the Grande, the sheriff and his posse forever trying to stop them. The famous answer to 'Where is he?' was '*al otro lado* - on the other side.' The two Great Rivers each flow through a thirsty frontier, cutting rock, giving life, providing a focus for human endeavour. It is no coincidence that their histories should map one another so closely. The North American and southern African frontiers were both products, after all, of the same general process – the expansion of Europe. Both continents were 'discovered' by sailors trying to find a sea route to Asia. Following the voyages of Bartolomeu Diaz (1488-) and Christopher Columbus (1492-), Europeans first colonised the two regions in the seventeenth century. Frontier zones gradually opened up as settlers spread north and east in southern Africa, west in North America. Coloured frontiersmen reached the Orange late in the eighteenth century, trappers and traders the Grande early in the nineteenth. By the 1870s the two river frontiers were sunk in lawlessness. Five thousand men were wanted in Texas – gamblers, smugglers, rustlers, robbers, killers. In the Cape Colony, the Korana and the British were engaged in the northern border wars, a series of skirmishes which took place on the islands and along the banks of the Orange.

A brisk morning paddle brought us to Remhoogte, one of the biggest farming operations in the northern Cape. The Unites were to end their trip here. We would miss each of them. Dave had tutored us in the ways of the wing paddle. Peter waited for lagging boats, asked questions, gave encouragment. Felix buoyed morale with his ridgeback-like enthusiasm, his humour and snippets of songs. But we owed the Unites a deeper debt. I don't think we would have reached the sea had they not been with us those first six days. They taught us technique – that is, how to paddle so as not to exhaust ourselves. They taught us to be circumspect at rapids and weirs, and showed us how to structure our days. Chris would later say: 'I think you can do anything in life in three two-hour sessions a day.' I talked to members of several Orange River expeditions in preparation for our trip. Most of them had troubles – accidents, injuries, exhaustion, bickering, desertions. One trip split in two, divided their food. The factions didn't speak to one another for eleven days. Such are the pressures, real and imagined, on long expeditions. Would we three novices have found our way without the Unites' early tuition? I don't think we would have.

Back on the water, our expedition seemed very small. We were down to two boats. It felt as if we were setting out for the first time. Late that afternoon we came to Wonderdraai, a great horseshoe bend twenty kilometres long. Leaving the whirr of pumps behind us, we entered its lazy reaches. Kingfishers trawled the banks, as they always did at first and last light. Whitefronted bee-eaters wiped their beaks on branches, destinging their prey. Chris and Laurence were passing under a tree when a clutch of darters exploded into the water around them like so many children practising bomb drops. The swallows employed a different tactic. They would burst from a tree and criss-cross one another down an everglade channel to a willow fifty yards downstream, only for this process to be repeated each time

we caught up with them. Huge flocks of geese and ducks were gathered on the sandbanks ahead of us. At our approach, the sound of beating wings grew steadily to fill the air and then the birds rose as one to a cacophany of honking, and headed downstream. Nothing I'd seen on the river, not spurwing geese disputing their territory, nor lame ducks thrashing the water ahead of our boats, had prepared me for the majesty of this sight, this sound. I thought of the birds of the river. That morning we had witnessed an adult fish eagle chase juveniles away from home. These birds, sitting alone or in pairs near the tops of tall trees, had become an icon of the trip. Dirk Loots had spoken, the previous evening, of '*die heimwee hartseer van die visarend skreeu* - the longing sorrow of the fish eagle's call.' No other sound takes me as surely back to the river. But my bird of the Orange has to be the goliath heron. We would round a bend in the river to find a goliath standing on a rock like a sentinel, a beacon. It would remain motionless throughout our approach and then, at about twenty yards, fall forwards into a laboured take-off. Laurence likened the goliath to a B-52 bomber, but the opening and closing of those great wings reminded me of nothing so much as the accordian player in an oompah band.

The moon, one day short of full, rose shortly before sunset. We beached next to a patch of grass, ate an early dinner, smoked a potato pipe. Then, as darkness closed in, we put onto the water again,

confident there would be no rapids in a meander as lazy as Wonderdraai. It was a warm evening and we had no need of splash decks or paddle tops. We glided along the moonlit water, freed of accessories, purged of tenses. The voices of cicadas, crickets and frogs pierced the night. Half-seen trees flitted by on the banks. Then we were in amongst ducks again and the growing crescendo of wings beating the air. And afterwards, silence.

III

Prieska is a nasty town. The youths lining the banks were unfriendly, hostile even. A beggar hassled us. At a filling station a drunk beat a child with a fanbelt. A young girl, sitting beside her boyfriend, flirted with us over cheeseburgers. The only other people to approach us were those wanting liquor and *twak* - tobacco. Little has changed, it seems, in the two hundred years since Henry Lichtenstein encountered the people of Prieska: 'We had scarcely entered into conversation with them before they began to exercise their country's charter, and beg of us, not only brandy and tobacco, but a number of sheep.' We did our shopping and stopped at the hotel for a beer. On our way out of town things took a turn for the better. A shopkeeper, noticing the plasters on Laurence's hands, gave us two pairs of cycling gloves in the bright colours of the national flag.

Prieska was once the dwelling place of Korana herders. They called it *Prieschap* - place of the lost she-goat. In 1801 Pieter Truter, a member of the Cape Court of Justice, and William Somerville, the garrison surgeon, forded at Prieska. They were on a government expedition in search of cattle to replenish the vast herds that had

perished from drought in the colony. Truter's son-in-law, John Barrow, gives an account of their expedition in his fabulously titled *Voyage to Cochinchina in 1792 and 1793: containing a general view of the valuable productions and political importance of this flourishing kingdom; and also of such European settlements as were visited on the voyage: with sketches of the manners, character and condition of their several inhabitants. To which is annexed an account of a journey, made in the years 1801 and 1802, to the residence of the Chief of the Booshuana nation, being the remotest point in the interior of Southern Africa to which Europeans have hitherto penetrated* (1806). Barrow was private secretary to the Governor of the Cape, Lord Macartney. On his return to England, he served in the Admiralty for forty years, during which time he introduced to the world the adventures of Captain William Bligh and Fletcher Christian in the Pitcairn Islands. While filmed versions of Barrow's book have popularised an abbreviated title, it was published as *The Eventful History of the Mutiny and Piratical Seizure of HMS Bounty: its causes and consequences* (1831).

Truter and Somerville – to return from the Pacific Ocean to the sea of sand and scrub that is the northern Cape – failed to obtain any cattle from the Sotho-Tswana. On their return journey from Lattakoo they visited Bitterdagga, Adam Kok II's kraal on the Great River. Kok complained of the predatory attacks of 'a certain free-booter named Africaaner.' Barrow relates that Jager Afrikaner and his gang had been assisted in these attacks by 'a person of so extraordinary a character, that a sketch of his history may not be uninteresting.' Stephanos was a Polish forger. Soon after his arrival at the Cape, he set about printing the paper currency of the government. The authorities detected his crime and sentenced him to death. Stephanos cut his way through the door of his cell with a rusty nail. He ate the sawdust, so Barrow tells us, and filled the grooves in the door with breadcrumbs. Stephanos fled to the Roggeveld, and then on to the

Sak River mission, where the Reverend Kicherer took him on as a mason. When a newspaper from the colony revealed Stephanos's true identity, Kicherer sent him on his way with some meat and a bible. Stephanos next appeared at Bitterdagga, on the Orange. He declared himself a prophet, sent by God to promote the Koks' prospects of happiness and eternal salvation. The fact that he had travelled alone and unarmed through Bushmanland lent some credence to his story. He taught the most striking parts of the Bible, concentrating especially on the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. He preached of dreams and visions and voices, often reducing his congregation to tears.

Each morning Stephanos would climb a nearby hill and vanish in a cloud of smoke – effected by setting fire to dry grass or igniting a little gunpowder. He would then return with orders from God that generally enriched himself. Stephanos soon had the pick of the cattle and wives. Barrow suggests he might also have climbed the hill to command a view of the plains, and so ascertain whether the officers of justice were in pursuit of him yet. When news of Stephanos's unorthodox teachings reached Sak River, the missionaries reported him to the authorities. Barrow notes that their prompt action helped stave off the establishment of 'a new and motley religion, partly Hebrew and partly Greek, at the head of which, as the *pater Deorum*, the name of *Stephanos* might in after ages have been rendered eminent.' Stephanos made for the west coast, hoping to escape on a passing ship. A farmer on the fringes of the colony recognised him and took him prisoner. Stephanos slit the farmer's throat with a razor and headed north for Jager Afrikaner's kraal.

Truter decided to send out an expeditionary force against Jager and Stephanos. Jager retreated to Blyderverwacht, north of the river, and Stephanos fled into Great Namaqualand, where he was later killed. A group of Xhosas, under their corporal Danster, assisted in

Truter's raid. Danster was an elephant hunter from the eastern Cape. Escaping a family feud, he headed north and west with his followers, and entered service in the colony. As soon as the Xhosas had acquired the guns that would allow them to pursue an independent existence, they slipped north. 'The banks of the Great River,' reports Lichtenstein, '...was become an asylum for all the rabble that were for any reason outcasts from the colony.' By 1800 Danster had assembled a considerable, if motley, force. In an attempt to corner the cattle and ivory trade, he entered into an alliance with Jager Afrikaner. Jager betrayed him, killing several of his men and capturing the Xhosa women and children. Danster approached Jager's kraal on a night of dancing and brandy and freed the women. This episode earned him the nickname *Umgaqi* - creep mouse. For the next thirty years Danster remained a minor force between the Sak and Orange rivers. He clashed with the San, the Korana, the Griquas and the colonists, as well as with other Xhosa clans in the area. He was twice arrested for his general lawlessness. On the second occasion Danster was imprisoned on Robben Island, but managed to escape in a boat. Wary of recapture, he gathered his followers together and trekked to Danstersnek near Zastron in the Orange Free State. Here his plundering activities continued unabated.

William Burchell, the gentleman traveller who visited the Vaal confluence in the company of his dog Wantrouw, forded the Orange at Prieska in 1811. This small, gentle man was not an obvious candidate for the rigours of travel in the Africa of his day. He confesses in his journal that prior to leaving Cape Town he had never slept a night in the open. And yet, accompanied by an ever-changing retinue of Khoi servants and by his much-loved pack of dogs, Burchell undertook a four year, 4 500 mile journey into the South African interior. He became its greatest naturalist, collecting in the course of his travels more than 63 000 objects 'in every branch of natural history.'

Burchell's *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (1822-24) is considered a classic of English travel literature. His honest and scientific approach renders his journal, in the historian Theal's opinion, 'one of the most trustworthy and valuable books ever issued upon South Africa.' And yet even this sober naturalist was enraptured by his first encounter with the Great River:

> The first view to which I happened to turn myself, in looking up the stream, realized those ideas of elegant and classic scenery, which are created in the minds of poets, those alluring fancies of a fairy tale, or the fascinating imagery of a romance. The waters of the majestic river, flowing in a broad expanse resembling a smooth translucent lake, seemed, with their gentle waves, to kiss the shore and bid it farewell forever, as they glided past in their way to the restless ocean…

Buddhists observe that none of us can step into the same river twice. Captain William Cornwallis Harris, who forded the Orange twenty-five years later, comes close:

> …the first glimpse that we obtained of it realized those ideas of elegant and classic scenery which exist in the minds of poets. The alluring fancies of a fairy fiction, or the fascinating imagery of a romance, were here brought into actual existence. The waters of this majestic river, three hundred yards in breadth flowing in one unbroken expanse, resembled a smooth translucent lake; and as its gentle waves glided past on their way to join the restless ocean… they seemed to kiss the shore before bidding it farewell.

Harris, a great plunderer of African game, published his version in *The Wild Sports of Southern Africa* (1839). He follows the above excerpt with the observation that 'to those who may conceive this description overcharged I will only remark that the sight of water after days in the desert, is probably one of the most delightful sensations that a human being can experience.' It is a pity Harris felt the need to plagiarise. His own plain prose is more heartfelt than the material he borrows.

Burchell made several drawings at Prieska, among them *Scene on the River Gariep*. He observed the altitude of the Sun's upper limb to fix his latitude, then turned his sextant on its side and 'ascertained trigonometrically... that the *breadth* of the river was nine hundred and thirty feet.' These activities are typical of Burchell's travels. Each day he recorded meteorological data and took compass bearings. He produced hundreds of superb illustrations and a detailed map of the colony. He 'discovered' the white rhinoceros, blue wildebeest, tsessebe and Burchell's zebra, and collected the skins of ninety-five different species of quadruped. At some point in his travels Burchell sketched the interior of his wagon. In amongst the general travel gear – telescope, sextant, gun – is a clutter of scientific and painting equipment. Pressed flowers and tortoise shells, horns, skins and skulls, vie for space with his extensive library. There is room for his flute, as well as for a bag of the peach-stones he distributed in the interior. On Sundays he flew the Union Jack over his wagon.

I took Burchell's route up to the Great River at the start of our canoe trip. Like other early travellers he made his way from Cape Town to Tulbagh and on through the Warmbokkeveld basin to Karoo

Poort, a cleft in the mountains that serves as a gateway to the Great Karoo. Here the ericas and proteas of the western Cape make way for drought-resistant succulents, for gannabos and brakbos and the other gnarled shrubs of the Karoo. All manner of explorers, hunters, missionaries and traders struck north-east from Karoo Poort. They crossed the Bokkeveld Karoo to the Roggeveld, then traversed the monstrous plains of the Great and Bo-Karoos to Prieska, and on, some of them, to Klaarwater, Lattakoo and beyond. Later, that extraordinary procession of prospectors, miners, drifters, dreamers, crooks and failures branched off to Kimberley and the Witwatersrand. I passed through Karoo Poort in midsummer. Like John Barrow, I encountered a wind 'like the blast from an open furnace door.' The plains of the Bokkeveld Karoo opened out before me. On first encountering this immense panorama of dustgreen and delicate blue, Burchell famously declared, 'I am arrived at the very door of the desert.' Burchell and Barrow would each have outspanned at Klein Hangklip, on a now forgotten highway. My road curled away to the south. Our routes converged again at the foot of Verlaten Kloof, the pass leading up to the Roggeveld plateau. One of Lichtenstein's Khoi servants was killed here by a San arrow. The attackers carried off his musket and powderhorn and cut the copper buttons from his jacket. At the top of the pass is Sutherland, the coldest town in the country. I am guessing it is also the clearest, as it is home to the South African Astronomical Observatory. Each Karoo town I passed *en route* to the Orange is named after a missionary or a Colonial Secretary: in the case of Sutherland and Fraserburg the former, Williston and Carnarvon the latter. These little towns with their well-preserved Victorian buildings sneak up on the motorist. I would be driving through a landscape of mesas and buttes and delicate colourations, with only a fence or the occasional copse of gums betraying human presence, when without warning a steeple would appear, then trees, a watertank, and a town.

Burchell, of course, encountered none of these – not even the trees: 'Nothing deserving of the name of *tree*, not even an Acacia, is to be seen between the Roggeveld mountain and the Gariep, a distance of 360 miles.' I found myself gawping, in these little towns, at the windmills that dotted backyards. The locals, I'm sure, gawped right back at kayaks in the Karoo. Somewhere beyond Fraserburg, I approached a windmill turning slowly in the convective heat. Without warning, a sharp hot gust sped across my bows and slammed into the windmill. A sudden clanking buckle stunned the desert.

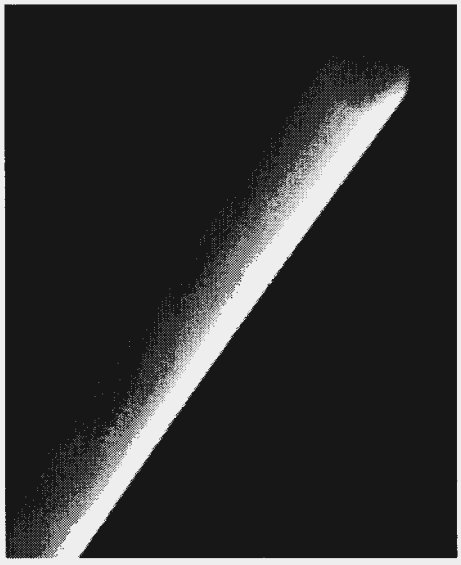
The windmill has transformed the Karoo of Burchell's day. Before the advent of the borehole, farmers needed a perennial source of surface water. The land was thinly populated, dwellings remote from one another. Town and farm names bear testimony to the importance of water: Brakwater, Perdewater, Graafwater, Putsonderwater – to consider but one suffix. Maps of Bushmanland and the Karoo are littered with names ending *-pan*, *-puts*, *-vlei*, *-dam*, *-kolk*, *-rivier*, *-fontein*. As the missionary John Campbell observed: 'This part of Africa, without a miracle, must, for want of water, remain a wilderness to the end of time; it cannot be inhabited.' Campbell's miracle turned out to be the windmill – or, more accurately, the windpump. This ungainly device, which performs the never-ending drudgery of lifting underground water to the surface, made possible the permanent settlement of a large part of arid South Africa. The earliest recorded

windpump in the country was erected at Brink's Farm near Saldanha Bay in 1848. It was a wooden structure with four cloth sails, of the type Quixote was wont to charge. A similar device – labelled 'a pump with shifting sails erected by Prof. P(iazzi) Smyth during his residence at the Cape' – appears in the foreground of W. J. Anderson's 1860 painting of the Cape Town Observatory. The artist has distorted it in an attempt to capture the movement of its sails turning heavily in the wind.

The invention of the Halliday Standard ushered in a new era of windpump design. P. J. du Toit of Hopetown imported one of these wooden devices in 1874 and became known locally as 'the father of the windpump.' Windpump sales took off with the design of all-steel models, their curved metal vanes arranged like the petals on a flower. Many thousands were imported in the last few years of the nineteenth century. The steady march of these Conquests, Climaxes and Dandys, Aermotors, Springboks and Southern Crosses, to say nothing of the Dempster Malcomesses and Gearing Selfoilings, conquered the Karoo, Namaqualand, Bushmanland and the Kalahari. Their clanks and creaks provide the arid interior with its most characteristic sound.

I was just starting to prepare dinner when the first arc of the full moon appeared behind the trees on the far bank. As darkness fell, the great

moon escaped the trees and reflected off the skin of the river. I reached for my Borges, the *Collected Fictions*, paged back in search of the Tlön phrase I had read the previous day: '*hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö* - upward, behind the onstreaming, it mooned.' We were camped on a broad expanse of grass a few kilometres below Prieska. As it was Chris's thirtieth birthday, we stayed up later than usual that night, sipping whisky and tugging at the remainder of the Richelieu brandy. Chris was in celebratory mode. 'I want to find the life of the river,' he announced, 'I want to talk to the peasants.' He trawled the banks, pressing coffee and brandy on fishermen who had appeared out of the night. Then, without warning, he rushed back into camp, shouting: 'Look, look, look, look, look!' As Laurence and I looked about in a dazed sort of a way, Christopher – beside himself on liquor and emotion – blurted: 'The moon!' We looked up. A reddish disc had invaded one side of the moon. It took us some moments to realise that we were witnessing an eclipse. We lay back and watched the redness slowly encroach. The otherworldliness of that half-red moon soon had us reflecting on our situation. Someone asked, 'What are we doing here?' What *were* we doing there, on the banks of some river, a long way from home? 'I want to paddle the Orange,' suggested Laurence. Which we all felt was a little lame. He qualified it: 'I always talk of big outdoor missions and yet never seem to do them.' We sat in silence pondering – or rather, I did – the breathing, gouging gap between hope and fulfilment. A final crescent of brightness glimmered ahead of the red.



'I'm running away,' said Chris, 'escaping society for a while.' Oh dear. Were we retreating from our failures? The moon was now fully eclipsed, a giant brandy-soaked peach hanging in the night sky. I can't remember what I said, exactly. Nothing like as honest as that. Probably something about needing a scaffolding for my book. The truth is I felt kinship with Chris's escape. But my deepest motivation for tackling the river was ten years of fatigue. A friend of mine called it 'sad sleep'. She helped me see that fatigue was a strategy I had invented to cope with problems with living: a girl who didn't love me; unsleeping nights asking *what-am-i-to-do-with-this-my-life*? Fatigue was an alibi. Paddling the Orange was about throwing off that alibi, about achieving something in the realm of the physical.

I fell asleep in the full of the eclipse. And, but for the periodic tinkle of the aluminium cooker supplying coffee to fishermen and to a member of our expedition who had determined to see in the dawn of his fourth decade, I slept well that moon-crazy night.

I have said nothing yet of paddling. This is what it feels like: the roll of your shoulders, stroke after stroke, the paddle now part of you, a triangle subtended by your arms; dip left, dip right, twist left and right, keep your arms straight, keep the triangle's shape. Work your back, your shoulders and torso, don't tire your arms. Feel the weight of the water, the press on your blade, then ease it away, not straight back but away

from the boat, out to the left, out to the right, send the stroke wide, let the wing do its work. Don't splash, don't pull hard, that generates little more speed, a lot more exhaustion. Twist at the waist, face left, and face right, lift that top hand, high, even higher, and push it, push on the shaft as much as you pull. I look at Laurence's back, see how loose he is, remember now to soften my neck, drop my shoulders. My gaze drifts to the banded ironstone of the Asbestos mountains, the riverine bush, the reeds near the shore. A stroke every two metres for 1 400 kilometers – that's over two million strokes between us should we reach the sea.

We stopped for tea under Westerberg Bridge. Chris and I walked into town to buy bread, apples, bananas – anything fresh. The air on the bridge was hot and still. Already we missed the water, the cool possibility of splashing ourselves. Westerberg, which appeared to be a reasonable settlement on our map, turned out to be a ghost town. The wooden buildings lining the main street looked like the set for a spaghetti western, long since filmed, now abandoned. Bushes were growing through cracks between planks, reclaiming ground that had been lost to their thorns. We walked past an open door. 'I think I'll slip upstairs for a bath,' said Chris, 'in one of those great zinc tubs. I'll get three redhead nymphettes to scrub my back, clean my nails, pour jugs of steaming water over me, and I'll hire my own music-man to sit by the door, just in case there's a disturbance in the salon downstairs, and somebody shoots the pianist.' An old man peered around the door as Chris was finishing his little speech. Westerberg, he told us, had been a mining town. It had closed down twenty years before.

We walked back to the bridge. Two kilometres north of the river, a sign informed us, was Koegas. We consulted our map. A shop and two other buildings – definitely too small for fresh produce. And yet this little cluster of buildings has earned its place in the annals of frontier violence. During the northern border war of 1878-9, two

separate incidents of colonial brutality took place near this dusty little outpost. The Koegas Atrocities, as they became known, were heard in the Victoria West circuit court on consecutive days. In each case the *accused were acquitted, provoking a public outcry both in the colony* and overseas. In the first incident a group of San and Nama men were arrested in the vicinity of Koegas on the vague suspicion that they had attacked a farmer. En route to Kenhardt jail, the men supposedly freed themselves and attacked their escort. Leonard Blaauw, Oude Rooy, Tisiep and Hans T'Wakiep were shot dead. A fifth man, Piet Blaauw, survived bullets to his head, neck and shoulder. The evidence against the burghers Bergmann and Hennik was overwhelming. They had been mounted and armed with both rifle and revolver, while the prisoners were on foot, tied to one another. The inquest, conducted in the veld where the corpses had been left to decompose, found that the position of the bullet holes in the skulls was more consistent with execution than escape. More damning still was the fact that Piet Blaauw testified against them. And yet, somehow, amid 'shouts and shrieks of joy' in the packed courtroom, the accused were acquitted. Reverend D.P. Faure, the court interpreter, was horrified: '...the verdict was scandalous, and its popularity was a still darker feature.' The other incident was, according to the Cape Argus of 23 September 1879, 'an equally foul chapter in the history of the Northern Border.' A commando stationed at Koegas attacked a party of Korana, San and Xhosas. Forty-six died, many of them women and children. One colonist was wounded. On the subsequent march five female prisoners and a four-year-old child named Apie died 'in a fight.' The burghers Smith, Duraan and Zoutaar were charged with their murder. At the preliminary examination a witness reported that a Sergeant Van der Merwe had executed a wounded man in the original attack. Van der Merwe was not indicted – in fact, he was appointed to the jury. So was a prominent local farmer named Van Heerde, who had publicly

stated a few days earlier that all Korana should be shot. The judge found, bizarrely, that the prosecution had failed to show that loss of life had taken place. Smith and Duraan were acquitted and Zoutaar, the only coloured man on trial, was handed a five year sentence for assault.

When the Cape Town newspapers ran 'ordinary reports' on the trials, Faure wrote to the Cape Argus: 'Having been present throughout the whole of the trials, and knowing something of the feeling in the district, I beg you to publish the poor and feeble lines of one who regrets to say that he blushes for his countrymen and feels ashamed of his South African nationality.' Faure's letter, famous in its day, was titled *Deeds of Shame* and signed *Fiat Justitia* - let justice be done. It caused a furore, both locally and in England, Scotland and Holland. In his letter Faure criticized Thomas Upington, Attorney-General of the Cape, for allowing the second atrocity to be heard at Victoria West when the verdict of the first had clearly shown that a fair and impartial trial would not be possible. Upington, who hadn't deemed the trials worthy of the Supreme Court, now used that institution to sue the Cape Argus for £20 000. In a moral victory for the newspaper, it was ordered to pay five pounds and one shilling. The colonial government, however, endorsed the iniquity of their judicial system by relieving Faure of his job.

A brisk two hour paddle delivered us from Koegas to the shade of a large tamarisk on the south bank. Laurence and I couldn't agree on where we should beach. We bickered for a while, then settled for neighbouring inlets. As it was my turn to make lunch, he called across to me: 'Do you want anything from my boat?'

'Yes,' I shot back. 'How about a little common sense?'

Laurence was so upset by this exchange that he stayed in his boat for the first twenty minutes of lunch, read the *Mail & Guardian*.

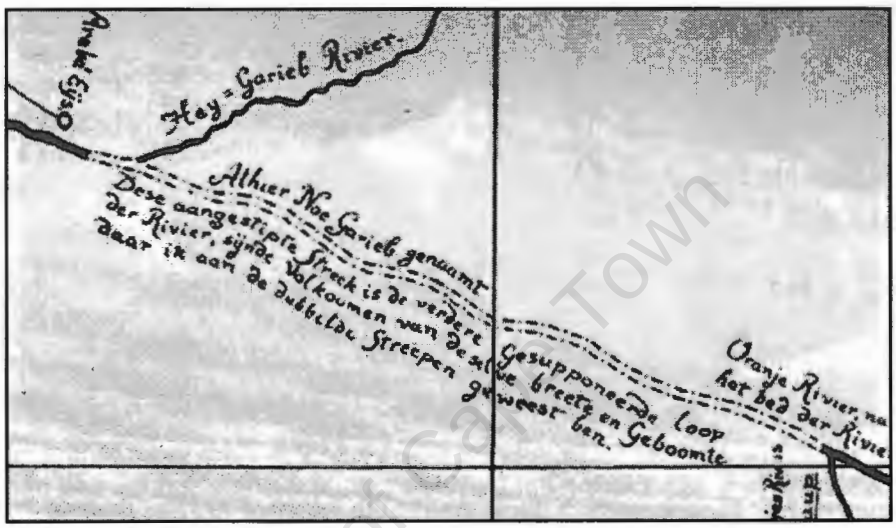
'Come near me,' said his expression, 'and I'll snap your fucking head off.'

Much of our scratchiness, I think, had to do with our aching bodies. Laurence and Chris had tendonitis in their wrists. Laurence also had a sore shoulder and blistered hands. My lower back was in poor shape and I was starting to get symptoms of fatigue – swollen glands, ulcers. I leaned forward to scoop tuna-mayo-cucumber onto a crispbread and tweaked something: 'Shit.'

'Come to me,' shouted Laurence from his boat, 'when you're bleeding.'

Directly across the river from the shade of our lunch-time tamarisk was Knypgat se Berg. We tried our hand at translation – Constipation Peak, Mount Pinchhole, Squeeze Buttress. This mountain was the easternmost point reached by Robert Gordon, commander of the Dutch garrison at the Cape, on his journey up the Orange in 1779.

Gordon climbed Knypgat se Berg and looked upriver. The direction of flow confirmed for him that this was the same river he had named after the Dutch Prince of Orange two years before, while on a tour of the eastern frontier. Gordon mapped the unexplored section of the river as a dotted line continuing upstream in an ESE direction.



A note on his map reads: '*Dese aangestipte streek* - this dotted portion is the further supposed course of the river, which is of exactly the same width and vegetation as where I have been at the double lined parts.' It was indeed the same river, but Gordon failed to anticipate its great loop north to its meeting with the Vaal, or Hey-Garieb.

Robert Gordon's fourth journey into the southern African interior took him from Cape Town to the mouth of the Orange. He travelled over a thousand kilometres upriver to Knypgat se Berg, then downriver again to Company's Drift in northern Namaqualand, and back to the Cape. He was accompanied by a veritable who's who of the northern frontier: Cornelius Kok and Claas Barends, who together helped found the Griqua nation; Klaas Afrikaner, father of Jager, the Lion of the North; and Petrus Pienaar, farmer, hunter, trader, rogue – consummate frontiersman. Gordon gives several reasons for heading

upriver. He wished to meet the *Briqua*, or Batlhaping, people. He wanted to see the great cataract the deserter Wikar had told him about. And he was in search of new plants and animals, particularly the giraffe. By the time Gordon reached Knypgat se Berg, he had, to some degree, achieved each of these objectives. It remained only for him to confirm that this river was the same one he had named the Orange in 1777. And yet, does this list of objectives explain away seven months of hardship, of living in a wagon, being hauled by oxen from one dusty stop to another, of daily worries about food and water, and fending off the attacks of wild animals and hostile people? I suspect Gordon had other, more personal, reasons to walk. He may have been looking for a place where the world was behind him, and before him nothing but solitude and the unknown. A well-concealed melancholy, perhaps, compelled him to move, and to keep moving.

Gordon is the outstanding eighteenth century explorer of southern Africa. His travel journals, written under exacting conditions in the veld, stand as a monument to his energy, patience and curiosity. They cover a broad range of interests – botany, zoology, geology, meteorology. For over a hundred and fifty years these journals were thought to have been lost. Then, in 1964, the director of the South African Archives, 'to keep the conversation going,' asked his counterpart at the County Archives in Staffordshire, England, whether he had any Dutch documents. *Voila*! In addition to his travel journals, Gordon and his draughtsman Schumacher left nearly four hundred paintings – landscapes, native tribes, fauna and flora. They produced the finest map of their day, a four-square-metre document crammed with sketches and notes. A visiting Admiral found Gordon 'a most ingenious, intelligent, sensible and agreeable acquaintance... He speaks Dutch, English, French, Hottentots, Caffree and Erse; has collected innumerable curiosities as a Virtuoso; has travelled over a great part of this vast Tract of Africa; met with a race of men very little

superior to Baboons, and one nation that never before saw a European in the heart of Africa.'

Gordon's family, though of Scots extraction, had been Dutch for over a hundred years. On his first visit to the Cape, Gordon collected a dozen springbok for the Prince of Orange's menagerie. He remained fiercely loyal to his Prince. In 1795 this loyalty led to his demise. During the battle of Muizenberg, a far-flung ripple of the Napoleonic wars, Gordon was torn between his allegiance to the House of Orange and his duties as commander of the garrison. His conduct, in both the battle and the subsequent surrender of the Cape to the British, has been described as 'irresolute in the extreme.' With the insults of his men ringing in his ears, Robert Gordon took his own life.

'We need to talk,' said Laurence. I knew things had been sticky between us for a while now, but I wasn't prepared for what followed. What Laurence had to say, basically, was that I was taking him and Chris for granted. I was treating the mission as if it were my own, as if they were just some *handlangers* - assistants I had got along for the ride. And then the killer blow: 'I sometimes think this book is more important to you than we are.'

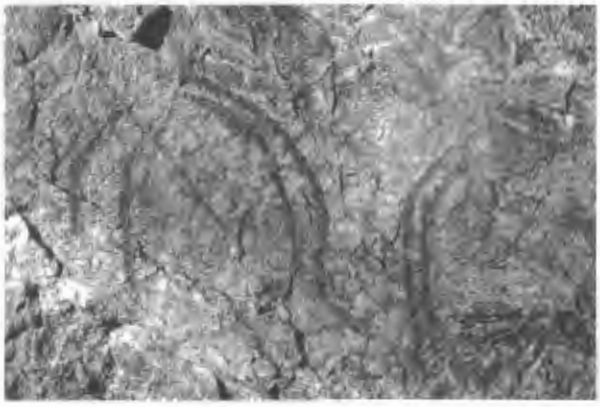
We paddled along in silence, Laurence in the Beluga, me next to him in the back seat of the sea kayak, Chris's calm presence up front. We were reflecting, each of us, on the shifting dynamics of our little group. 'When I was in the navy,' continued Laurence, 'we were all scared those first few weeks. We learned that it was better to be scared together, than for each of us to retreat into his own little world. You're backing away, Billy, clinging to your share – hard and selfish and scared.'

Laurence was right. I *was* scared. Scared that my back would give in, scared that fatigue would end my trip early. And yes, my

response, I now saw, had been to turn inward, to marshal my energy, hold it close. I had withdrawn from my companions, ignored their contributions, their injuries and fears. Not once, in all the time Laurence had spent fixing up my back, had I asked after his shoulder or wrist.

'I'm also scared,' said Laurence. 'Of failing, of not finishing this thing. It's the first time in my life that my body has seemed fallible.' We paddled in silence again, each of us oblivious, I think, to our stark surrounds. I watched Chris's shoulders, followed the easy rhythm of his blue soccer shirt. I read, as if for the first time, the words *Michael Oak* – the name of a school, I think – printed in white across his back. Yes. He was an oak. Things had been scratchy between Laurence and me for days now. Christopher – cheerful, impenetrable, solid as a big old tree – had been holding us together. He had been here before, seen this sort of thing on the dhow. He turned in his seat to face us: 'The thing is, trips like this are easier than the rest of life. Heat, pain, exhaustion – we can handle these things. They're less destructive of us than people.'

The river grew sluggish. We had entered the upper reaches of Boegoeberg Dam. Shortly before sunset, to the unlikely sight of a fisheagle circling a *kokerboom* - quiver tree ridge, we beached in front of Albaster Klip, a thirty-metre-high outcrop of vein quartz. In a light which seemed to emanate from the quartz itself, we investigated its



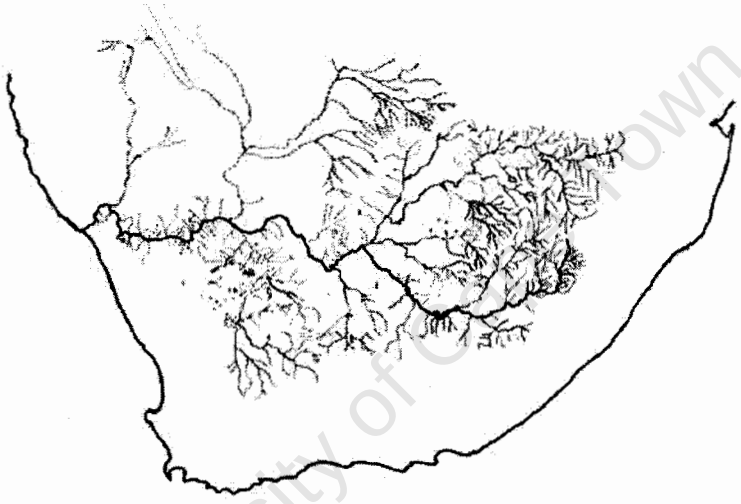
smooth white face and found parallel red lines. They appeared to be part of a San painting. While rock engravings are common on the arid plains bordering the river, paintings are

not (they're more commonly found in caves in mountainous terrain). San art, once considered the doodling of primitives, is now thought to chart the activities of healers in a trance. San women sit in a tight circle around a fire clapping the rhythms of a medicine song while the men dance around them. The healers go into a trance. They use this state to cure the sick or depressed, to chase away malevolent spirits marauding as lions, to guide antelope to hunters, or to travel to distant friends. Albaster Klip, it seems, was a reference point for San trancing. We guessed at the meaning of those meandering red lines. Could they be phosphenes, the images you see on the inside of your lids when you close your eyes? Are they a nosebleed, common in trancing? Perhaps they deify the river; or map it; or simply are the river.

We camped opposite Albaster, cooked potato and butternut in the fire. After supper I walked down to the water, watched it sweep by in the moonlight. Where do you come from, I wondered? What is your story?

Volcanic forces began to break up the super-continent of Gondwanaland 180 million years ago. A great rift defined the east coast of Africa. It widened, the sea filled it, and eventually the Indian and Antarctic-Australian plates drifted off. Millions of years later, a similar process dislodged South America. By about 80 million years ago, southern Africa was freed of land connections, other than to the north. An escarpment formed along the east coast, a proto-Drakensberg. As it retreated due to erosion, it dumped billions of tons of rock and soil into the Indian Ocean. Like a raft relieved of its load, the eastern side of the subcontinent rose. The Drakensberg range became a watershed. A stream cut west across the central plateau, which tilted gently towards the distant Atlantic. It followed the present course of the Orange to Prieska but then, instead of turning north-east as the river does today, it continued south-west across Bushmanland

to the ocean. Three hundred kilometres to the north, near the present Orange River mouth, another stream was cutting back from the Atlantic. It encountered uplift, cutting through mountains as they formed. This accounts for the unusual sight of the Orange flowing *into* the Richtersveld mountains. The river cutting back from the coast met the Drakensberg river near Prieska and, in a process known as river capture, stole its water.



The Orange arises, along with the east-flowing Tugela, on Mont-aux-Sources. This peak in Lesotho also gives rise to the Caledon, which joins the Orange at Bethulie, and the Eland, which feeds the Orange's major tributary, the Vaal. Fully half of the Orange's annual discharge comes from the mountain kingdom of Lesotho – the only country on earth whose entire territory lies a kilometre or more above sea level. In the course of its 2 250 kilometres, the Orange drains a catchment of one million square kilometres, over four times the area of the British Isles. Like those other great African rivers, the Nile and the Niger, it drains a subcontinent thirsting for water, offering a lifeline to plants and animals. And of course to humans. As we have seen, the Orange

may well have flowed through the Garden of Eden. Certainly the San have used it for at least 40 000 years. Europeans arrived and ushered in an era of conflict – man versus mammal, Khoisan versus colonist, Briton versus Boer. There has even been conflict between man and river. The Orange was tamed, its flow harnessed to serve agricultural needs, its seasonal rhythms replaced with computer-generated flows.

Boegoeberg Dam, completed in the early 1930s, was the first significant barrier to restrict the Orange. Today it functions as little more than a weir – the huge dams upstream ensure that water forever pours over its wall. And yet even Boegoeberg manages to silence the Orange. Ninety minutes of unmoving water – it was like paddling through treacle – brought us to a campsite short of the wall. We had no idea how we were going to lug our boats around. Then Pierrie Ludik arrived in his oversize Ford pickup. Not that it looked oversize with him in it. He was Herculean – six foot four, a hundred and ten kilograms at least. Laurence psyched himself up for the handshake. Pierrie must have thought, 'Jiss, these Englishmen can grip.' Because I was next and he nearly broke my unsuspecting fingers.

We hoisted our boats onto the pickup. Pierrie is the dam manager's son. He told me that Louw van Riet and Mickey du Toit had nearly gone over the dam wall a few weeks earlier. Someone in Prieska had told them it was shootable, so they didn't bother to scout. Only the frantic waving of fisherman caused them to turn. They told Pierrie that they were clocking eighty to ninety kilometers a day – at that rate they wouldn't have had time to scout. Peirrie treated the two paddlers to a wild night. After *boerewors* and punch, they set off to hunt spring-hare. On their return they settled down to a few beers. Come midnight the party was peckish again. Pierrie suggested fried liver. The only problem was they had to shoot an animal first. They

eventually sat down to fried springbok liver at two in the morning. The following day Louw and Mickey got onto the water at eleven. They still managed to keep their rendevouz with a friend who lived ninety kilometers downstream – a terrifying effort that saw them shooting rapids and weirs in a storm late at night: '*Al lig wat daar was, is as dit geblits het* - the only light there was, was when lightning struck.'

We stopped at the wall – I gauged it to be ten metres at least – then drove on to a suitable put-in. Pierrie hoisted the fully-laden double onto his shoulder. It weighed close to a hundred kilograms. I was supposed to be holding the tail, but the thornbush he charged through scratched me off. He was soon back to collect the single. Then the gods whisked him off to go and help some other struggling mortals. We launched into a series of rapids. It was good to see the river moving again, playful after the sadness of the dam. Half an hour later the water slowed once more, this time for a weir. It was classic Orange River scenery. Blue sky, white cloud, stony grey hillside, dustgreen banks, black rock, smooth brown river and the sparkling

white roar of human intervention. We portaged river-right. The next weir spanned densely reeded banks. We took a run-up and drove our kayaks into the reeds, climbed out in deep water and managed, Vietnam-like, to swim-wade-pull-crawl our boats to the shore. Laurence and I were squabbling over who should push and who pull the double kayak on the portage, when the tension between us boiled over. He let out a bellow and gave the double a mighty shove. A flock of ibises started from their riverine perch. I took up the slack on the rope at the front and off we charged, two men and a boat through the undergrowth. We wove a manic route between rock and tree, leaving Chris in our dusty wake. If I could have a video clip of any one minute of our trip, I would choose this ludicrous charge through the veld. We arrived at the muddy shore below the weir – sheepish, exhausted, and strangely calm. As we squelched down to the water, Laurence stopped, bent over, scooped up a handful of mud.

'Isn't it odd,' he said, 'that we haven't had a mudfight yet?' He turrned and let fly. The mud caught me square in the chest.

'You bastard,' I yelled, dropping the boat, sinking my fingers into the ooze. Ten seconds later we were slithering sliding rolling in it, caking one another, wedging mud into ears, fashioning dreadlocks. Then we lay back and laughed, and sank slowly into the slime.

'Just remember,' said Laurence, 'you're not alone.'

Some kilometres downstream we noticed trellising poles high up on the south bank. I scrambled up to them. The south was green with vineyard. The north was Kalahari red. We had entered the canal zone, and the southern fringes of the largest unbroken expanse of sand on the planet. That evening, on the look-out for a campsite, we passed a steep sandbank. It didn't look promising, but Chris scouted all the same. He found two level clearings in the trees beyond the sand, a bedroom, a kitchen. Laurence set off in search of a farm shop. He returned at dusk, grumbling about the farmer he had met. His hints

for grapes and beer (and there's nothing subtle about Lol's hints) had fallen on deaf ears. An hour later Jorrie Steenkamp, the farmer, and Gerrit Bronkhorst, his neighbour, arrived laden with the largest loaf of bread I have ever seen, just-picked grapes, a bag of tomatoes, a bottle of whisky and three litres of coke. We sat down on the sandbank, gave Jorrie our only mug, mixed the other drinks in bowls, a billie can, a pot. We drank fast, then talked fast. I have no memory of our conversation on that sandbank. I must trust the snippets I scrawled on *2822 Postmasburg*, our map for that day. Gerrit: '*Hoor hier, so tussen hakies, die noord Kaap is maar eng.*' Jorrie: '*Die kleurling is 'n gekwalifiseerde skelm. Hy steel vir dagga en pille* - the coloured is a qualified crook. He steals for dope and mandrax.' Gerrit: '*Die platteland is 'n hoofstuk wat klaar is. En as die platteland klaar is, is die land in sy moer* - the countryside is a chapter that's finished. And when the countryside's finished, the country goes to the dogs.' The wind picked up. It smelled of rain, blew sand into our bowls. Chris said he needed to start cooking. '*Dan drink ons maar 'n loopdop* - then we're drinking one for the road.' The *loopdop* was a bowl too far for Laurence. His Afrikaans, which had been fragmenting all evening, now disintegrated. Out came snatches of Spanish, Zulu – any language would do, it seemed, so long as it wasn't English. '*Lourens,*' said Gerrit, '*jy't te veel coke gedrink* - you drank too much coke.' So too, it seemed, had Jorrie. He stood up, found his bearings – so he thought – and crashed off through the undergrowth.

We awoke to monkeys throwing grapes at us. They had raided camp, stolen our bread, grapes and tomatoes, and were now taunting us from the canopy. The sun was high already, and hot.

According to J. S. Marais, we had been skirting the boundary of coloured South Africa since the start of our trip; today we would enter

its heartland. There is a fold-out map facing page 14 of *The Cape Coloured People* (1937). On it Marais has drawn what he calls the 'Line of equilibrium between Coloured and Bantu Peoples.'

This supposed boundary between the Xhosa and Tswana in the east, the Khoisan and Basters in the west, zigzags up from the south coast to Philippolis on the Orange. It then follows the river, past its confluence with the Vaal, past Prieska, to Kheis, an historic settlement just downstream of our camp. Here the line of equilibrium leaves the Orange to march north across the Kalahari. Twenty years later, another line traced Marais's. The Eiselen Line, named for Verwoerd's Secretary of Native Affairs, was less a racist demarcation than a massive exercise in social engineering. Coloured labour would receive preference to the west of Eiselen's line. He foresaw 'the ultimate elimination' of black South Africans from this region.

It was not a morning for such thoughts, though. As we barrelled past wooded banks on cool fast river, past intrusions of Kalahari red with the south-east wind at our backs, Marais and Eiselen's imaginary lines seemed hopelessly remote from the river wilderness before us. The map, as semanticist Alfred Korzybski points out, is not the territory. An otter adopted us, led us down a series of black rock rapids which dropped in sparkling ledges. Chris spotted a

leguaan holding onto a tree in the current, only its head above water. It was, we decided, hunting little birds. I thought of A. A. Anderson and his outdoor existence, the months he spent on this stretch of water in 1871: 'So enjoyable was this mode of life, what with sketching, exploring, fishing and shooting, besides the daily sail on the river, visiting the islands, and the opposite shore, geologizing and reading under the overhanging trees as the boat floated quietly with the gentle current, I determined to waste three or four months on its banks... ample opportunity of indulging in this wild and free life.' Anderson, a settler from Natal, set off in 1860 to explore the interior of southern Africa. With his wagon and fourteen trek-oxen, he roamed the subcontinent from east coast to west, from Ovamboland in the north to Bushmanland in the south. He was away from civilisation for so long that he was twice reported missing, presumed dead. Anderson records his adventures in *Twenty-five Years in a Waggon* (1887). He was escaping, he says, the postman's knock, the whistle of the train and other such civilising influences that kept him in a state of perpetual nervous excitement. He was drawn to deserts, 'for there the mind can have unlimited action.' The Kalahari provided the ideal outlet for his isolationist desires: 'To travel when you please, eat and drink when so inclined... explore, read or sleep, as the case may be, no laws to curb your actions, or conventional habits to be studied.' Anderson's words remind me of Chris, of his year on the dhow. And of the time I asked him what editing conventions he had used while working for the *Bolivian Times*: 'Do you really think I'd be party to conventions?' he replied.

Anderson built a boat from willow branches and bullock hides. It was modelled on a Welsh coracle, the shape of half an egg cut through lengthways. Using two hundred pounds of stones as ballast, Anderson rigged a mast and lug-sail and cruised up and down the river, exploring islands, shooting geese and ducks. 'This being the first

boat that ever floated on the Orange,' he writes, 'I consider it worthy of recording.' At best, Anderson's coracle was the sixth boat to float on the Orange – not taking into account the logs of the San, nor the temporary rafts of pioneer travellers. Robert Gordon launched a boat at the river mouth in 1779. A carpenter in Andrew Smith's party built a boat near the Vaal confluence in 1834. The missionaries of Warmbad, in southern Namibia, kept a dinghy on the banks of the river, and in 1848 a ferry was operating at Botha's Drift, north of Colesberg – 'a gallant but unwieldy bark' in the estimation of Thomas Baines. That same year Sir Harry Smith crossed the Orange on inflatable india-rubber floats.

That evening, sipping at the last of Jorrie's whiskey, I found myself thinking of the nationalist government's attempt to keep blacks out of the western Cape. I would have imagined that a day of wilderness would have banished Eiselen's divide-and-rule politics from my mind, and yet here it was, re-engaging like a flywheel that had been spinning free all day. Apartheid was nothing if not ambitious – dividing people into racial groups, separating these groups, keeping them apart. The cornerstone of apartheid was the Population Registration Act of 1950, which decreed that every South African was to be classified white, native or coloured. (Asians, initially considered coloured, later became a separate group.) The act defined as white 'a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as, a White person, but does not include a person, who, although in appearance obviously a White person, is generally accepted as a Coloured person.' The definition of native was equally vague. A coloured person was simply 'a person who is not a White person or a Native.' This brief statement of what-a-coloured-is-not replaced several gems that had been doing the rounds prior to apartheid. The Pensions Act of 1928, for instance, defined as coloured someone who was 'neither (a) a Turk or member of a race or tribe in Asia, nor (b) a

member of an aboriginal race or tribe in Africa, nor (c) a Hottentot, Bushman or Koranna, nor (d) a person residing in a native location..., nor (e) an American negro.' Even if one buys into the pseudo-science of white and native races, it is clear there's no such thing as a coloured race. It's a bureaucratic fiction, a basket to catch people who fit nowhere else.

In 1955 a *Sunday Times* editorial commented that 'nobody has been able to understand the yardstick by which a coloured man is measured and turned into a native.' When the old biological methods – skin colour, eye colour, pencil in the hair, proportion of nose width to height – proved inadequate, social criteria were introduced. 'These methods,' reads a sign in the Apartheid Museum, 'have been reported in Johannesburg as being used by the Race Classification Board to determine whether a man was Native or Coloured: a soccer player is a Native, a rugby player is Coloured. A high bed is Coloured, a low bed Native.' The official criteria used by apartheid for racial classification – appearance, descent and general acceptance – were notoriously arbitary. A judge in the appellate division concluded: 'The definition is so framed that there must be a great number of people who cannot be proved to be either European or Non-European for the purposes of the Act... cases are quite conceivable in which a person may according to one branch of the definition (that of obvious appearance) fall in one group and according to another (that of general acceptance and repute) fall in the other.' Given this judgement, it's hardly surprising that in 1955 the Minister for the Interior, the person responsible for issuing race identity cards, should have announced the existence of 90 000 'borderline' cases.

The Population Registration Act proved most tragic for those people on the borderline between black and coloured, coloured and white. Families were broken up, mother and daughter handed different classifications, forced to live in different areas. The hurt and

humiliation were intensified when it was family members themselves who had approached the authorities to have their classification changed. Coloureds passing as white gained access to better schools, better jobs, better seats on the bus, they could watch films in whites-only cinemas. Blacks passing as coloured had even more to gain: freedom from the pass system and influx control, vastly improved residential and freehold rights. In his book *Passing for White* (1970), Graham Watson charts the suffering caused by the arbitary nature of racial classification. He presents case histories of divided families: a married couple with one child at a white school, two darker children at a coloured school; a married couple who are classified coloured in 1953, white in 1955, coloured again in 1957, white in 1958, coloured in 1959, and subsequently white; a Scottish immigrant and a coloured woman who have a white child – of their nine grandchildren, seven are classified white, of their sixteen great-grandchildren, eight are white and eight coloured. 'Thus,' writes Watson, 'do the architects of apartheid separate the races.' In his documentary film *The Search for Sandra Laing* (1977), Anthony Thomas tells the story of a dark child born to Afrikaner parents. At age 11 Sandra Laing is officially declared coloured and expelled from her white school. Fifteen months later a new law rules that children cannot be classified differently to their parents. Sandra is white again. But she isn't accepted in white society and so elopes with a black man, Petros Zwane, and marries him. At the end of Thomas's film, Sandra is living in a Bantustan with Petros and their two children, waiting for the outcome of her application to be reclassified black.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and to a lesser extent the first half of the twentieth, light-skinned coloureds who were both rich and educated enough could gain admission to Afrikaner society. In a process known as *vorentoetrouery* - marrying up, the Basters of the northern Cape sought out light-skinned spouses so as

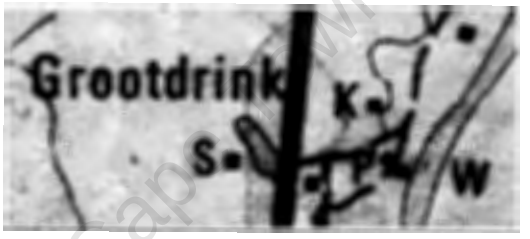
to *uitBaster* - breed out their Khoi features and ultimately pass for white. Apartheid employed a large bureaucracy to cut off this escape route. People hoping to pass for white after 1948 faced a gruelling ordeal. They had to cut all ties with coloured family and friends, move to an area where whites lived, alter their speech and their habits, find employment in a white occupation, join a white church and sports club, cultivate white friends. In short, they had to become 'generally accepted' as white. This process invariably involved tragedy. A dark child was forbidden to answer the door, or to sit at table when guests were present. Sometimes spurned friends informed on people trying to pass for white. Family members were generally more supportive. When they encountered their lighter-skinned relative in public, they would play *vensterkies* – that is, fix their attention on a shop window until the relative had walked past.

We came to a roadbridge. '*Môre oom*,' I hailed a fisherman. '*Sê vir my, waar loop hierdie pad* - where does this road go?'

'*Grootdrink toe*,' he announced, 'to Big Drink. You need to drink if you live around here.' His smile threatened to split his face in two. The northern Cape is given to odd names. Two days back we had passed Draghoender and Putsonderwater, settlements on the railway line linking Prieska and Upington. Draghoender, literally 'clothing-chicken,' is a corruption of *dragonder* - dragoon. A horse bought from the Cape dragoons strayed on a hunting expedition to the northern Cape. It survived by digging a well. A farm was established on the spot and named in its honour. Putsonderwater's story also revolves around water. In the 1880s David Ockhuis dug a well on the site of today's town. Ockhuis, a Baster, was scared of losing his water to the white *trekboers* - nomadic pastoralists. When asked by a *trekboer* whether he had a well, he replied, '*Ja, meneer, ek het 'n put, maar dis*

'n put sonder water - yes, sir, I have a well, but it's a well without water.' Ockhuis held out for a few years, before succumbing to the irresistable force of frontier history. In 1885 John Scott, Special Commissioner for the Northern Border, wrote of the Basters: 'Almost all the waterplaces were discovered and opened up by them, but they have been pushed out and onwards by the advance of the Dutch farmers until now there are not many farming on their own account, except quite near to the Orange River.'

I took our map from its watertight box, unfolded it on my splashdeck. Grootdrink comprised a few scattered dots, a tiny wedge of built-up yellow, the obligatory K, P, W, S of church, police station, shop and school. How had Grootdrink got its name, I wondered? Most likely something to do the Orange. Or perhaps the old fisherman was right, perhaps some pioneer had been driven to drink by a stubborn life on the frontier. Certainly, the settlement had its name by 1885. For this was the year, writes F. C. Metrowitch in *Scotty Smith: South Africa's Robin Hood* (1962), in which a young man named Gerber and his cousin opened a store at 'Grootdrink, an isolated little place on the Orange River, inhabited in those days only by Bushmen.' The youths were terrified when the notorious outlaw Scotty Smith paid them a visit. He put them at ease: 'I can see you're poor, hard-working youngsters. Nothing'll happen to you. Your things are quite safe with me. I only rob the rich to help the poor.'



Scotty Smith was named for his nationality and his skill at shoeing horses. He maintained that his real name was George St. Leger Gordon Lennox and that he was born, in 1845, into the illustrious Scottish family of that name. There may be some truth to this claim – this was, after all, the era of the remittance man, the rogue

son shipped off to the colonies and paid a stipend to stay there. After adventures in Australia, India and the United States, this six foot-something Scotsman with a red beard and resolute jaw landed in South Africa. He flourished in the wild north-west, gaining infamy as a horse-thief, cattle-rustler, mercenary, highwayman, illicit diamond buyer, gun-runner, confidence trickster, jailbreaker, spy, raconteur and defender of the poor and weak. In another time or place he might have spent most of his life in prison.

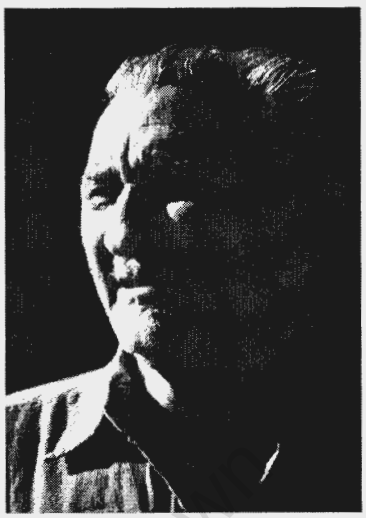
There are many stories told of Scotty Smith's chivalry and keen sense of humour. He once arrived at the home of a old farmer, who shared what little food he had with him. After dinner the old Boer mentioned that there was a £100 reward out for the capture of Scotty Smith. 'I wish I could earn that reward,' mused the farmer. 'Things haven't been going too well with me lately.' The next morning Scotty revealed his identity and insisted that his host fetch his gun and ride into town with him. The farmer protested but Scotty pointed out that they had yet to build a prison that could hold him. Scotty was duly locked up. The farmer got his £100 and, so the story goes, took a miserable ride back to his farm. Waiting on his stoep, with a broad grin, was the irrepressible Scotty Smith. On another occasion Scotty stayed with a widow who was about to lose her farm because she couldn't pay a mortgage that her brother-in-law was calling in. Scotty gave her the £400 with the instruction: 'When he comes tomorrow to collect his money, pay him in full. Whatever happens, don't forget to obtain a proper receipt.' The following day was not a good one for the brother-in-law. First he discovered that the widow had the cash waiting for him. Then, soon after leaving her farm, he was relieved of it by an armed man on horseback.

Scotty Smith had a unique, if skewed, sense of morality. He would steal a horse and leave town in a hurry. On his return, perhaps six months later, he would settle his debt with the hotel keeper. He

claimed he had never killed a man in cold blood, yet he had no qualms about shooting the San trackers the police employed to find him in the Kalahari. He never stole from the poor, yet was capable of vicious attacks on those he did rob. In about 1890 Scotty settled on the farm Leitland's Pan, deep in the Kalahari. He occupied this land illegally for twenty years, then retired to a small irrigation *erf* on the banks of the Orange in Upington. Part of his income during these years came from the export of San skeletons to overseas museums. He claimed that he was exhuming the bodies of the police trackers he had shot. But as the demand increased, so did Scotty's supply. His trade permit was duly withdrawn. Scotty Smith died an unglamorous death in 1918, victim to the Spanish 'flu that killed over twenty million people worldwide.

I had heard a story about Scotty Smith some months before – it was more garlicky than Metrowitch's biography, not so *Boys' Own*. My friend Lennart was prospecting for diamonds in the dry riverbed of the Molopo, on the farm Gous. I took a detour from my tour of Bushmanland, crossed the Orange into the red and yellow of the Kalahari, the blue and white of its monstrous sky, and continued north to Gous. The brothers Christoffel and Hermanus Van Wyk told me something of the farm's history. Gous is owned by 130-odd people. Rooi Stoffel Van Wyk left the farm, in his will of 1910, to his third generation. The first and second generations have usufruct, with the third generation taking possession on the death of the last usufructer. Six of the second generation are still alive. Christoffel and Hermanus are the only two still living on the land. They dabble in sheep and goats during the week, retire to their houses in Upington at the weekend. The brothers are deeply connected to Gous. Their grandfather Rooi Stoffel bought the farm from the state after a Frenchman named Gustav De Juy was cheated out of it by Scotty

Smith. Their father then married De Juy's granddaughter. There's something of the Parisian boule player about each of the brothers.



Gustav De Juy arrived at the Cape from France as a twenty-year-old in the 1860s. He robbed a *poskoets*, a stagecoach carrying Crown gold, and headed north to the Orange River. He bought several farms, Gous among them, and over the next twenty years established himself as a sheep, cattle and ostrich farmer. Lennart showed me the remains of a stone-walled funnel De Juy used to herd wild ostrich. Scotty Smith, a sometime transport rider, decided to take some money off this rich Frenchman. He loaded his ox wagon with supplies in Upington and made the four day journey out to Gous. De Juy bought the full load for his farm shop. This comprised – so Hermanus told me, sitting forward in his chair, counting the items on his fingers – two boxes of tobacco, some rolls of material, several pairs of *velskoen* - hide shoes, four five-gallon vats of *witblitz* - a strong white spirit, an eight-gallon vat of red wine and a *streepsak* - hessian bag each of raw coffee beans, *mieliemeel* - crushed maize, *boeremeel* - wheat flour and yellow sugar. Scotty threw in two vats of brandy *gratis*. He then proceeded to get De Juy drunk. When time for payment came, De Juy removed a key from his waistcoat pocket and unlocked the wooden chest he had been sitting on. Inside were three and a half *boksakke* filled with gold coins, each bag made from a goat's torso. Overwhelmed by Scotty's company, and the free brandy, De Juy scooped out three handfuls of gold sovereigns. Scotty had to stop him from scooping out more. At this point, said Hermanus, Scotty realised he was dealing with the stagecoach robber. When De Juy

passed out, Scotty unlocked the chest, took one *boksak* and spanned in his oxen. De Juy only discovered the theft eight days later, when giving his sons money to visit his various stock posts. He rode to Upington and laid a claim. In the subsequent court case, Scotty was found guilty. In a recess before sentencing, Scotty approached De Juy. He admitted guilt and begged to salvage their friendship. Over a drink in the bar he suggested they sign a statement in which he undertook to return the missing gold. Scotty produced a piece of paper which they each signed. When they entered the courtroom for sentencing, Scotty's lawyer called for a mistrial. What De Juy had in fact signed was a statement saying he had falsely accused Scotty Smith. Scotty then demanded, and was awarded, damages of £800. De Juy, who had claimed that the stolen gold was his life savings, didn't dare produce any more. He was unable to pay the fine, and the state attached his farm.

Christoffel Van Wyk told me that as a young man he was so incensed with Scotty Smith for stealing his great-grandfather's gold that he visited a *siener* - medium called Peterson in Upington. He explained to Peterson that he wanted to have it out with Scotty Smith's ghost for depriving him of his inheritance. Peterson mumbled and called out, mumbled and called. Eventually he turned to Christoffel and said: '*Scotty Smith se gees is bedrywig. Hulle bou hel en hy ry die bakstene van hel in 'n kruiwa aan* - Scotty Smith's ghost is busy. They're building hell and he's carting the bricks of hell in a wheelbarrow. He next gets leave – one hour and thirty minutes – in a hundred years time. You can speak to him then.' Christoffel asked me whether I would interview Scotty on the 17th of September 2050.

We stopped for tea twenty kilometres short of Upington. I clambered up the bank. Green vineyard stretched out in every direction, as far as

I could see. I climbed into the cool shade of the trellising, tasted the sultanas. They were sweet and juicy. I broke off several large bunches and skidded back down the bank. Chris and Laurence were swimming. I dived in, surfaced, rolled onto my back. Cool strong current enveloped me, carried me off downstream. Reeds, trees, clouds. It seemed another river now that I was immersed in it.

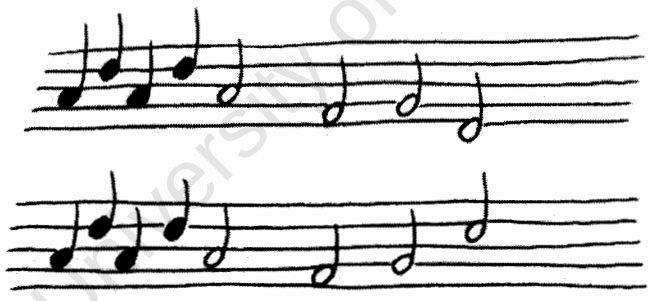
A broad swath of green, its rows end on to the barren wastes of Bushmanland and the Kalahari, clings to the Orange from Boegoeberg to Augrabies. The three hundred kilometre canal zone is centred on Upington, a town whose economy has depended on the river ever since its foundation in the 1880s. Local history has it that the missionary Christian Schröder first conceived of running a canal from the river. Historian Martin Legassick points out that such historiography takes for granted that white innovation and drive built modern South Africa. Legassick sets the record straight by quoting from an 1887 report on the affairs of the northern border: 'In 1882 there was granted to one Abraham September, formerly a slave, by the Committee of Management, a farm facing the Orange River and lying about twelve miles above Upington. This old man discovered that there was the possibility of leading out the water of a lateral branch of the river on to some alluvial soil on his farm. He set to work and succeeded in getting a small stream on to a low-lying portion of his ground... Mr Scott and Mr Schröder hearing of this, inspected the place, and as it seemed to them practicable to lead the water from this point on to the alluvial soil lining the river bank for many miles, even beyond the village of Upington, a meeting was called, and steps were taken to begin irrigation works on a scale of considerable magnitude.' So Schröder and John Healy Scott, the Special Magistrate for the Northern Border, took their lead from Abraham Holbors September, a Baster who had settled on the Orange in the aftermath of the northern border wars.

Schröder's Baster congregation took two years to build the Upington canal. The very success of this venture, though, was to prove their downfall. White settlers began to look with envy upon their land, once worthless semi-desert, now producing good yields. Settlers flocked across the Orange and, with a steady supply of alcohol, easy credit and legal high jinks, relieved the Basters of their land. More and more whites made their way to the river. Schröder and Japie Lutz, furrower extraordinaire, took their canal building skills downstream to Keimoes and the poor white labour colony at Kakamas. By 1940 the region was a thriving commercial centre, producing hundreds of tons of dried fruit each year, several thousand bags of wheat, bales of lucerne counted by the million. A local publicist was able to describe 'a verdant paradise...through irrigation settlements, along canals, past fields of lucerne, orange groves, vineyards, and past kameldoring trees. You see green islands with patch-quilt farmlands and red-roofed houses, white stone bridges and suspension bridges made of wire strands laced with thousands of short wild tree poles.' Today the mosaic of lucerne, oranges, wheat, peaches and karakul, has been replaced, almost entirely, by sultana grapes. The first sultanas were planted at Keimoes in the 1940s. Raisins fast became one of the region's major products. More vines were planted in the 1970s as the table grape and wine industries developed. But the real take-off started in the early 1980s when a Kakamas farmer flew his grapes to Europe. He caught the early market and made a killing. Soon farmers like Piet Karstens, Attie Valentin and Chris Steenkamp were planting thousands of hectares over to export table grapes. (There are two Chris Steenkamps in the area, I discovered. The farmer is called Chris Perd; the hotelier Chris Whisky.) In search of hotter climes, which produce earlier crops, these big players spiralled off downstream like a New York party. Sultanas and electricity developed in tandem, first one then the other leading the way from Kakamas to Blouputs, and on

to Southern Farms, Raap en Skraap and finally Kambreek at Klein Pella, a hundred and fifty kilometres downstream of Augrabies. Such is the legacy of Abraham Holbors September.

IV

There is a scene in Sergio Leone's film *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* in which the ugly runs round and round a graveyard in ever-increasing, ever-more-desperate circles in search of the name that will lead him to gold. My thoughts drifted repeatedly to this beautifully filmed sequence as, for the third time that morning, I walked slowly from grave to grave in the early twentieth-century section of Upington cemetery. Ennio Morricone's haunting whistle, so evocative of the film's Karoo-like terrain, echoed around in my skull:



I was looking for Scotty Smith's grave. He had died in the Spanish 'flu of 1918 and was buried, so I had read, in Upington. After an hour of random circling and methodical gridding, I still hadn't found his grave. 'What are you looking for? Perhaps we can help you.' I looked up. Abel Hugo and Dylan Moss were an unlikely pair. Abel was tall, thin, tubercular – a car guard from Cape Town, sent to the dry climate of Upington for his lungs: '*Dis 'n plaasdorpietjie die, ek is van die stad* - this is a farm town, I'm from the city.' Dylan was even taller, broad-

shouldered, vital as a Staffordshire bull-terrier in its prime. He was a film-maker: 'The SABC commissioned me to do something on the people of the Gariep. They wanted farmers, mine managers, toothless old Namas. I'm giving them the drunk, the ugly, the washed up.'

'So which of those is you,' I asked, winking at Abel. He started to laugh, a rasping cackle that turned into a coughing fit. It sounded as if his lungs were about to land on the gravel. No more jokes then. I told them I was looking for the grave of George Lennox, alias Scotty Smith.

Some minutes later, Dylan's search intersected with mine. 'I don't know whether you know this,' he said, 'but there's a thriving gay community in Upington. I'm thinking of doing this *Priscilla* rip-off. Get a couple of queens onto the back of a truck, all dolled up in cabaret gear with long veils. Then set off through the veld, mid-afternoon, Abba blasting, or Pavarotti, it doesn't really matter – their arms in the air, wigs blown back, and the veils, twenty metres long at least, billowing out over the northern Cape, trailing into the dust thrown up by the truck.'

Five minutes later Abel called us over to a shiny granite plinth. There, in large white letters, was the name 'Scotty Smith'. I had walked past the grave several times, ignoring it as I had all recent installations. I squatted down to read the original copper plaque: 'Gone from us but not forgotten.' There's a story behind this inscription. On a Saturday morning in 1884 Scotty Smith attended a horse sale in

Kimberley. When a fine black stallion came under the hammer, Scotty mounted him and rode calmly around the square. As the auctioneer began his final chant of 'Going... going...,' Scotty turned into Du Toitspan Road and galloped out of sight. A whisper spread around the crowd that the rider was Scotty Smith, and so, to make the best of bad job, the auctioneer continued: 'Gone to Scotty Smith. Gone... but not forgotten.'

We had paddled into Upington the previous afternoon. Houses crouched in the shade of treed gardens. Their lawns spread out before them to the top of the steep bank, then tumbled over the edge down to the tranquil water below. In comparison to Hopetown or Prieska it seemed as if we had arrived at one of the great river cities of Europe. Civilisation beckoned. Movies and music, cold beer and red meat – and women, of course, their perfume and dresses. A man in a speedboat pointed the way to his brother's guesthouse. Eben Mocke met us at the water's edge, suggested we pull our boats up onto his pontoon for the night, camp on his lawn. He was short, dapper, mustachioed, keen to talk about the river. We sipped gin and tonics at the bottom of his garden, looked out over the broad, weir-slowed Orange, watched people rig their tents in the campsite on the opposite bank. Eben told us about a school friend of his, a good long-jumper, who had tried to leap the headwaters of Augrabies. He had slipped and fallen, been washed over the falls. An electric-neon device zapped insects somewhere off to our left. Several river expeditions had camped on his lawn, said Eben. They had generally been in poor shape. We were lucky to be amateurs, he said, freed from the pressure of clocking big miles. Eben cautioned us about the section of river from Kanoneiland to Kakamas. He had flown over it in his microlight – it was steep and channelly, overgrown, wild. A Frenchman who had tried to paddle the river solo a few years before had destroyed his boat at Miggie Falls just below Kanoneiland.

We went out to a steakhouse that evening, ripped at our meat, ate off one another's plates, terrified our poor waitress. The next morning Laurence set off in search of new fertilizer bags for waterproofing; Chris did the food shop; I looked for Scotty Smith's grave. We left Upington at noon. Black rock rapids and low shootable weirs punctuated the stretch to Kanoneiland, South Africa's largest island. We forked right for Bloems Mond, Kolie Strauss's farm on the north bank. Kolie, a friend of a friend, had offered us beds for the night. *En route* to Bloems Mond we passed McTaggart's Camp and Dyason's Klip. Both farms take their name from the northern border wars.

In March 1879 the colonial forces were making little progress against a collection of Korana, Griqua, Xhosa, and San entrenched on the islands of the Orange River. The Cape Parliament, which had been spending £10 000 a month on the war, sent the Attorney General, Thomas Upington, to investigate. Upington decided that the man on the spot, Maximillian Jackson, would make a convenient scapegoat. He reproached Jackson for having more men at his command than Cortez had needed to conquer the Mexican Empire, and forced a resignation out of him. Captain McTaggart was appointed in Jackson's place. McTaggart set up camp on the farm that now bears his name and immediately started attacking enemy strongholds on Kanoneiland and the smaller islands downstream. On the 10th of April he was riding at the head of the Northern Border Horse and the recently formed Orange River Rangers. A few miles downstream of his camp, reports McTaggart, 'I came suddenly upon the enemy who opened fire upon us from a natural fortified scance.' McTaggart ordered his men to return fire. During a lull in the shooting, Field Adjudant William Dyason decided to negotiate peace. His Baster soldiers, seconded from the eastern frontier, warned him that he would be shot at. Dyason nevertheless tied a white handkerchief to a stick

and walked out towards the enemy. As he approached the fortified scance, a shot rang out and a bullet struck him between the eyes. Both the cluster of menhir-shaped boulders and the farm on which they stand are today known as Dyason's Klip.

The northern border wars of 1868-9 and 1878-9 display all the key factors that fed the never-ending cycle of violence on the northern frontier: colonial expansion and Khoisan resistance, cattle raids and punitive reprisals, the struggle for land, water and game, and the often desperate attempt to maintain independence and identity. Although a range of indigenous peoples engaged in these skirmishes along the middle Orange, they are often referred to as the Korana Wars. Named for an early chief Kora, and known to Jan van Riebeeck as the Gorachoqua, the Korana were the first native people to flee the confines of white settlement following the arrival of the Europeans in the mid seventeenth century. There is much uncertainty about patterns of Khoi migration, but it seems the Korana, unwilling to resist or assimilate, crossed the Hottentots-Holland mountains and gradually made their way north to the Orange. In 1778 the Swedish deserter Hendrik Wikar reported the existence of a number of Korana settlements along the stretch of river between Prieska and Upington. The Korana were pastoralists who migrated with their herds. Their society was inherently unstable, as a single raid could reduce a powerful man to poverty. This instability was exploited

by an assortment of renegade settlers who arrived at the Orange shortly after Wikar. Chief among them was Jan Bloem, a German who had deserted ship in 1780. Soon after settling in the colony he murdered his wife and fled north to the Orange. He gathered a following of San and Korana and took to raiding the communities living along the river. Bloem was helped by the brothers Jacob and Franz Kruger, forgers who had escaped from Robben Island by boat. These renegades had a hugely disruptive effect on Korana society. Their impact, though, wasn't all negative. Bloem took eight wives from among the Springbok, Katte, Taaibosch and Links Korana, thereby contributing to the formation of a multi-ethnic society on the fringes of the colony. His son, Jan Bloem, Jr., became chief of the Springbok Korana in the early 1800s and was, along with Adam Kok II and Barend Barends, a major player in Transorangia. Jacob Kruger took five wives. One of his sons, Nicholas, became counsellor to Andries Waterboer. Another, Abraham, was leader to a group of Korana visited by John Philip of the London Missionary Society in 1825: 'I expected a horde of naked savages and I found a number of smart young men, dressed quite in the style of the most respectable farmers of the colony. The young men had generally white fustian jackets, leather pantaloons, striped waistcoats, white hats with broad edges, shirts, neckcloths, stockings and shoes.' Border ruffians such as Bloem and the Krugers are seldom given the credit they deserve. Frederick Jackson Turner, for instance, historian of the American West, classifies frontiers by intruder occupations – missionaries , pastoralists, traders, cultivators, administrators, soldiers. He fails to mention the desperate characters who generally precede religion, commerce, settlement and government. The first and most colourful chapter in the history of any frontier is written by the renegade settlers who pitch up on the periphery of civilisation after something has gone wrong in their lives.

The arrival of the Griquas and the Afrikaner Oorlams on the middle Orange in the early 1800s placed further pressure on the traditional Korana way of life. Many Korana became Griqua dependants. Others adapted to frontier life. They acquired horses and firearms and joined in raids on weaker tribes. 'The name Koranna,' wrote one observer in 1833, 'designates... less a people than an association of brigands.' When the surveyor Robert Moffat visited the Orange River in 1856 he found the Korana scattered in a broad band, both north and south of the river, from Augrabies to the Vaal confluence: 'They are remarkably tenacious of its banks, and seldom sally forth to the outer country, except for hunting and seeking up ostrich feathers, and honey among the Bushmen who roam the hills.' Soon after Moffat's visit Baster farmers started pressing from the south, closely followed by white *trekboers.* As the borderlands became more populous, the Korana lost access to water and pasture. With the Kalahari to the north, the Sotho-Tswana to the east and the Afrikaner Oorlams and Bondelswarts Nama to the west, it must have seemed to the Korana as if there was no longer place for them in frontier society. The struggle was on, not only for their independence, but for their very survival.

The Korana claimed sovereignty of the lands either side of the Orange, and refused to acknowledge Sir Harry Smith's extension of the colonial border to the south bank of the river in 1847. They launched a guerrilla war against the colonists. Between the months of November and May, when the river flowed strongest, they made forays deep into the colony, rounded up large herds of cattle and drove them north. They swam the cattle across the river to densely wooded islands. As Oupa Boesman, an 87-year-old farm labourer, told me: '*Kyk, 'n Korana met wilgerhoutblok vir perd was 'n kurkprop op 'n water* - look, a Kora with a willow log for a horse, was like a cork on water.' Commandos, comprising reluctant and often ill-disciplined men, made

little impression on the cattle thieves entrenched behind rocks and rough stone defences on their island strongholds. Any attempt to hack through the mimosa trees and thick riverine bush would have left attackers hopelessly exposed to Korana fire. J.S. Marais reports that by the end of the 1860s the Korana had taken the place of the Bushmen as the number one enemy on the northern frontier. The colonists considered the Korana a degenerate and lazy group of bandits with a tendency towards stock theft. No contemporary account sees Korana resistance for what it was: a defiant stand against colonial rule, a last desperate throw of the dice. The historian Theal's take is typical: 'If all South Africa – possibly all the world – had been searched, a more utterly worthless collection of human beings could not have been got together than these ragamuffin vagabonds who refused to submit to the restraints of law and order, and set the colonial government at defiance. The only grievance that any of them had was that part of the ground they roamed over was being occupied as farms.'

The issues facing the Korana applied equally to the dispossessed Xhosa, Griqua, Damara, Nama, and San living along the river. Many attached themselves to Korana bands. In 1868 drought led to wide-spread poverty, and the Korana escalated their raiding activities. White and Baster stock losses became critical and the general lawlessness along the middle Orange erupted into war. The government passed the Northern Border Protection Act and dispatched Maximillian Jackson north across Bushmanland with a mounted police force of fifty men. Jackson soon discovered that the 'robber chiefs' Jan Kivido and Piet Rooy had become the strongest of the river Korana. Their kraals were bursting with stolen cattle and they were conducting a brisk trade in liquor and firearms with rogue settlers. Another leader, Cupido Pofadder, had entered into a treaty with the government. In exchange for apprehending marauding bands, the

government recognised him as chief of the river Korana and supplied him with ammunition. It soon became clear, though, that even with Pofadder's help a force of fifty men was far too small to protect a six-hundred-kilometre border against hundreds of armed men. Raids continued deep into the colony and many settlers fled their farms in the divisions of Fraserburg, Victoria West and Calvinia. When the Border Police were routed by a large party of Korana at De Tuin in May 1869, Jackson called for reinforcements. Sir Walter Currie's Frontier Armed and Mounted Police, along with a regiment of Baster soldiers, were sent from the eastern frontier. They launched an offensive and flushed the Korana from several of the islands. Legend has it that the name of Kanoneiland, or Cannon Island, dates from this period. Currie bombarded the island with an Armstrong cannon, terrifying the enemy. Rooy decided to answer in kind. He had his men hollow out the trunk of a *kokerboom* and fill it to the brim with gunpowder, old horseshoes and round river stones. They then pointed the makeshift cannon in the direction of the enemy. The resultant explosion killed several of the cannon-bearers. Rooy, so the story goes, took this setback philosophically, observing: 'If it looks like this over here, just imagine what it must look like where the bullets landed.' After Currie's departure, Jackson resorted to the time-honoured colonial strategy of divide-and-rule. He threatened to attack Klaas Lukas's kraal unless Lukas helped him apprehend the warlords. Lukas, who had remained aloof from the fighting, called a meeting with Kivido and Rooy, ostensibly to broker a peace deal. He took the two chiefs prisoner and handed them over to Jackson. Their followings disintegrated and the war was at an end. Kivido and Rooy were sent to Robben Island. Cupido Pofadder and Klaas Lukas were rewarded with cattle to the value of £300. In return for their ongoing cooperation, the territory north of the river between the Augrabies Falls and Griqualand West was designated Koranaland and ceded to the two chiefs.

In 1872 Jackson was sent to the troubled diamond fields of Kimberley. Korana gangs immediately reoccupied the islands. Lukas and Pofadder were powerless to stop them. Their priority, in any case, lay in dealing with a wave of Basters trekking into their territory. These proto-voortrekkers were being squeezed north by their white cousins, the *trekboers*. As the traveller George Thompson observed: 'It is a great hardship to this class of people [i.e. the Basters] that they have been systematically prevented from acquiring landed property in the Colony. In consequence of this, they are generally driven entirely beyond the boundary, and tempted to become outlaws and robbers; for if any of them occupy and improve a vacant spot within the limit, they are always liable to be dispossessed by some boor obtaining a grant of it from the Government.' A group of Basters led by Dirk Vilander had crossed the Orange River in the 1840s, eventually settling at Mier in the Kalahari. In 1868 Hermanus Van Wyk led the Basters of De Tuin on a two-year trek to Rehoboth in central Namibia. Later groups trekked no further than Koranaland. They were encouraged to settle there by the Dutch-Reformed missionary, Christiaan Schröder, who had visited the Basters of De Tuin and found them more receptive to his teachings than the Korana. He talked Klaas Lukas into bestowing burgher rights onto Basters. The policy got out of hand and soon Basters were flooding into Koranaland. The government, who regarded the Basters as more desirable neighbours than the Korana (and perhaps secretly hoped the Korana would be absorbed or destroyed), took no measures to prevent this influx.

By the mid 1870s the peace on the northern frontier was looking fragile. The area had again been stressed by drought and the people of the river were reduced to eating gum and a syrup made from boiled leaves. Destitute Korana bands roamed the countryside and there was a marked increase in stock theft. Poverty served only to sharpen the Korana's growing realisation that their traditional way of

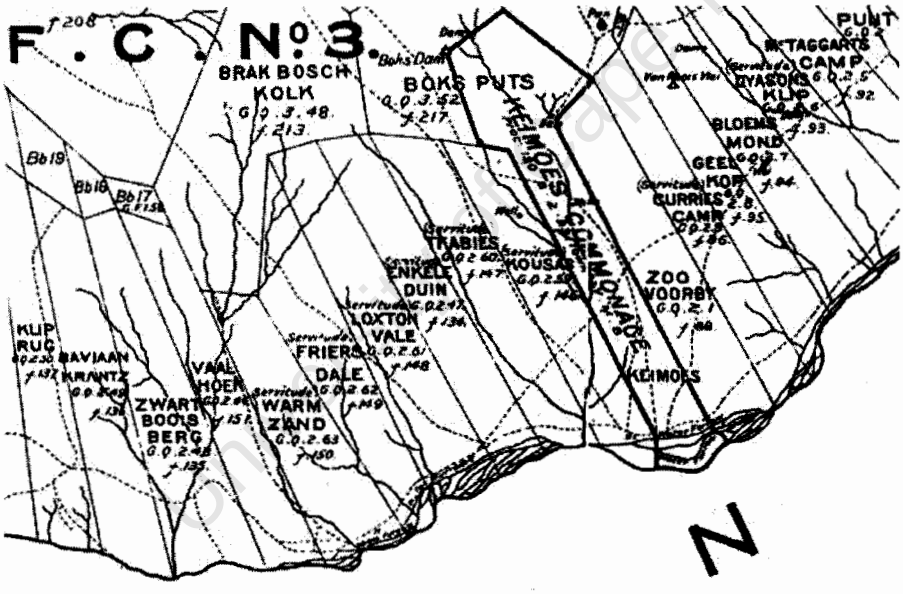
life was at an end. Like the Topnaar pastoralists Deneys Reitz encountered in the Kaokoveld, they were dying from a disease called civilisation. By 1878, writes Teresa Strauss in *War along the Orange* (1979) the entire northern border was 'seething with discontent and virtually any event would have been sufficient to precipitate an uprising.' The event, as it transpired, came from a surprising quarter. The Xhosa of the northern Cape had lost their land in Pramberg and Schietfontein to white wool farmers. They drifted north to the Orange and settled on the south bank near Prieska. When a rumour of diamondiferous gravels caused a minor rush of white settlers to Prieska, the Xhosa were evicted and resettled in Griqualand West. Then, in 1877, a Land Court ruled that they had no rights to the land they had been settled on. This was the third and final betrayal for Donker Malgas, headman of the northern Xhosa. Aware that the colonial government had its hands full fighting the Xhosa on the eastern frontier, he declared war in April 1878. Many Griquas, with land grievances of their own, flocked to join him. Malgas and the Griqua leader Jan Pienaar at first entrenched themselves in the Langeberg mountains. When they later retreated to the Orange, and joined forces with the rebelling Klaas Lukas, the varying degrees of unrest along the banks flared into open warfare.

'For months the offenders were estimated not to exceed three hundred in number,' remarked the Cape Argus of 12 August 1879, 'and it was only after a most discreditable exhibition of weakness and apathy, that their numbers increased to a possible thousand.' Certainly, by the time Major Nesbitt, Special Magistrate for the Northern Border, resigned due to ill-health in December, the Xhosa-Griqua-Korana alliance had the upper hand in the war. Enter Maximilian Jackson. He found the bulk of his men to be 'time-expired Burghers and Volunteer Bastards,' and immediately set about restoring morale. He sent for Klaas Pofadder, who had succeeded his brother

Cupido as chief of Lower Koranaland, and entered into a treaty with him. Pofadder departed with five pounds of gunpowder, twenty pounds of lead and four muzzle-loading guns. Two days later, however, he defected to the enemy. Jackson gathered a force of six hundred men at De Neus Drift and was in the act of ferrying them across the river when Thomas Upington arrived from Cape Town. Upington used the Pofadder affair (and the accusation that he had more men at his command than Cortez) to force a resignation out of Jackson. Captain McTaggart took over, drove the enemy from their strongholds and took four hundred prisoners. He chased the robber chiefs to Riemvasmaak, a mountainous area north of Augrabies, flushed them out into the Kalahari, and rounded them up.

The chiefs were imprisoned on Robben Island, and their followers sent into the service of the colony. In a move that signalled their determination to put an end to disturbances on the northern border, the government cleared the middle Orange of all its former inhabitants. Most Korana ended up as Afrikaans-speaking coloureds on farms in Beaufort West, Calvinia, Clanwilliam and Springbok. There had been talk of creating a reserve for them, but John Scott, Special Commissioner for the Northern Border, rejected this idea with the observation that 'unless we could cut their throats it only puts the difficulty somewhere else, and most likely increases it.' There was no way back for these frontier opportunists. Their desperate attempt to cling to an anachronistic way of life had failed. The now derelict Koranaland was renamed Gordonia – not, as one might hope, for the pioneering exploits of Robert Gordon, but rather for the colonial administrator Gordon Sprigg. The Korana's former settlement, Olyvenhoutsdrif, would in time be named Upington, and McTaggart, Currie and Dyason would all have farms named after them. The last trace of the Korana, who for two hundred years lived along the banks of the Orange, is the far-off Korannaberg in the eastern Kalahari.

Christiaan Schröder, having lost his Korana congregation, urged the government to reserve Gordonia for Baster settlement. The government was favourably disposed towards the Basters, many of whom had fought for the colony. Besides, they would provide a buffer between the colonists south of the river and the indigenous tribes to the north. Gordonia became known as Basterland. A management committee, under the chairmanship of John Scott, was set up to oversee the settling of three hundred families. The land along the north bank from Kheis to Augrabies was divided into long rectangular farms fronting onto the river. The farms were surveyed by men on fast-walking horses, each half an hour wide and half a day deep.



Schröder, concerned that his charges would in time lose their land to unscrupulous whites, arranged for them to receive usufruct but not property rights. All owners were to pay a perpetual quitrient, due on the first of January each year. Several farms were handed out to regimental captains and the rest were auctioned off, at a nominal fee, to the wealthier Basters. The less prosperous received small irrigation

plots near Olyvenhoutsdrif, where they worked on Schröder's canal to pay off their land.

It didn't take long for whites to start crossing the imaginary line that bisected the mainstream of the Orange and marked the boundary between Basterland and the Cape Colony. The first white men to be granted land were those who married Baster women. A Canadian named Robbie Frier settled on the farm Friersdale in 1882. He grew bananas, cherries, pears, figs, potatoes, cabbages, squash, and maize in the alluvial soils of the islands. His home became a haven for travellers. He entertained his friend Scotty Smith in the lingering twilight of those long evenings by the river. Scotty provided the biltong, Frier the home-brewed *witblits*. Another pioneering white landowner north of the river was Frederick Loxton, whose ancestors came from the village of that name in Somerset, England. He married Anna Booysen, daughter of a Baster captain, in 1886 and received as dowry the farms Eenduin and Loxtonvale. His descendants still farm the land today. Rupert Isaacson, an Englishman whose mother is a Loxton, says of his discovery that he has 'coloured cousins' living along the Orange: 'I pictured them as lean, wild-looking people in a barren landscape of red and brown rock cut through by an immense muddy river.'

History has vindicated Schröder's fears of a white take-over. Eenduin and Loxtonvale are two of the very few instances of Basters retaining possession of their land. With the completion of the Upington canal, Basterland became an attractive proposition for white settlers. Here is a Cape official in 1887: 'In 1880 the country wherein the Bastards were invited to settle, was regarded as a worthless desert, and no one envied the people to whom it had been allotted. But all this is now changed... Last season a patch of cleared ground not quite 100 yards by 300 yielded sixty-six muids of exceptionally fine wheat... There are persons who now regard the Bastard settlers with jealousy,

and look with envy upon the land their industry has made so rich.' In 1885 Gordonia was incorporated into British Bechuanaland. Four years later the Committee of Management was disbanded and the Basters were subject, for the first time, to British law. There was now nothing to prevent whites from buying land in Gordonia. The soldiers were the first to sell. They may have been battle-hard from the Xhosa wars, but they weren't up to the challenge of farming along the banks of the Orange in the days before canals. As Oupa Boesman told me: '*Daai vorige tyd was 'n rou affêre hier, eilande, bome, en een of twee onbewerkde akkerkies* - in the early days it was raw around here, islands, trees, and one or two unworked acres. Some beans, some corn, it was monkey business.' It must have been a tough existence, herding one's sheep back and forth between the river and the ever-receding pastures. And imagine, if you will, the plight of a young soldier, having to clear the land of thick riparian bush in forty-two degrees of heat, plant lucerne in a swarm of black flies, and then irrigate by bucket. I imagine if he could get a few guineas for his land, he'd let it go.

While the white occupation of Basterland wasn't illegal, it was almost certainly immoral. The first white owner of the farm Geel Kop, for instance, swopped it off a Baster for a team of donkeys and a roll of tobacco. A certain Maasdorp gives the Baster perspective: 'The white men are too clever for us coloured people. Just as many honest people as there are among them, so many dishonest ones there are also among them. I have seen in Gordonia that our Basters received land as a present from Queen Victoria. My father and other Basters. At that time no white man was allowed to farm on the other side of the Grootrivier... Afterwards the white men came in. They bought the fertile farms, one for a wagon, the other for a wagon containing pumpkins and a team of oxen. Another drank a few dop-brandys so that he did not even know what he received, but his property was sold.'

The Gordonia settlement had banned the sale of alcohol to prevent Basters being relieved of their land. Prohibition, though, seldom achieves its aims. Traders offered Baster farmers easy credit for bootleg liquor, and also for general goods. These traders and shopkeepers, many of them Jews who had been chased out of Lithuania and so knew something of how the world worked, would then call in their debts. There are many stories of unscrupulous dealings, often involving lawyers who foreclosed on farmers with relatively small debts. At one stage Leo Abt, a shopkeeper in Grootdrink, together with a wholesaler from Port Elizabeth named Mosenthal, owned 23 farms in eastern Gordonia. Other traders sold farms on to the highest bidder, invariably white. By 1920 there were few Baster landowners left. Schröder, witnessing his second congregation slide into destitution, observed that when whites trek into a country formerly occupied by *gekleurden* - coloureds, the coloureds retrogress: '*Zy nemen geld op, maken schulden, worden aanzienlyke sommen aangebooten alzoo verliezen zy hun vast eigendom. Sommige vertrekken noordwaards, ander zwerven rond, of moeten dienen* - they borrow money, incur debts, are offered large sums and so lose their fixed property. Some trek north, others roam around, or must serve.'

The sun was low and gold over rich green vineyard when we climbed the bank at Bloems Mond. I phoned Kolie Strauss. A minute later a *bakkie* appeared from a mansion on a rise behind the vines and drove slowly down to meet us. Kolie was older than I'd expected, dignified. If this hadn't been the northern Cape, he'd have been wearing a cravat for sure. Kolie asked how we were doing. Laurence said he was feeling the effect of all the paddling, that it must have had something to do with his turning thirty later that week. '*Dertig*?' said Kolie. '*Maar al jou ligte is nog groen* - Thirty? But all your lights are still green.' Kolie's

wife Adrie led us down a long corridor, apportioning rooms as she went. Soft pile carpets, big fluffy towels, a bowl of chocolates next to the bed. I felt filthy for the first time on the trip, climbed into the bath fully clothed, washed each article as I removed it.

We sat on a balcony overlooking the river, drinking beer, trying our best not to look wolf-like as we reached for the sliced biltong in a tureen-sized bowl. '*Ek wat die Kalahari in sy murg ken en Boesmanland in sy murg ken* - I, who know the Kalahari to its marrow and know Bushmanland to its marrow, can tell you that this river is both a stranger and a work of wonder.' This was Kolie's opening gambit in what proved to be an account of a his life in arid South Africa. In the early sixties he farmed karakul sheep in the Kalahari. He talked of the harsh environment throwing the farmer off like a horse, of the desert showing you your limitations: '*Dis taai boere wat daar lewe. Daardie wat nie met só min tevrede is nie, trek maar* - it's tough farmers that live there. Those who aren't satisfied with so little, move on.' Kolie's borehole sank four hundred foot to briny water. His whole life centred on the pump, and on driving drums of water to his house. After four years in the Kalahari he moved to Bushmanland. He farmed dorper sheep near Kenhardt for the next thirty years. In 1970 Kolie and two partners bought a farm on the Orange. At a time when their neighbours were cultivating a mixed bag of lucerne, wheat, vegetables and wine, they decided on raisins. The Hendrik Verwoerd Dam would soon tame the annual floods, they were advised, and so greatly improve the prospects of agriculture along the river. In 1962 the nationalist government had produced a white paper proposing the ambitious Orange River Project. Four years later, shortly after Verwoerd's assassination, it got the green light. Paraded under the banner 'Water for a Thousand Years,' the Orange River Project has to be seen as one of the great acts of apartheid bravado. The

nationalists would show the world that South Africa, in the immortal words of President P.W. Botha, was not a nation of jellyfish.

The Verwoerd Dam was completed in 1972. Farmers were promised ten flood-free years, as it would take at least that long to fill the dam. The Great River had other ideas. Just as Kolie and his partners started to realise some income from their venture, their farm was washed away in the floods of 1974/5. Kolie's Bushmanland dorpers did well in the late seventies and helped finance the replanting of Orange River vines. Then, in a neat piece of dovetailing, the raisins saved the dorpers during the great drought of the 1980s. Kolie calls these '*die dodelike jare* - the deadly years.' He was faced with the choice '*óf trek, óf vrek, óf verkoop en koop voer* - trek with the sheep, or let them die, or sell some sheep and buy grain for the remainder.' Keeping sheep on his drought-stricken land would have destroyed the vegetation. So Kolie trekked with 1 200 dorper ewes for eight long years. He followed the patchy rain, renting ground as he went, from Vanwyksvlei to Victoria West then back, in transit, in Kenhardt and on to Brandvlei, Loeriesfontein and Pofadder. The sheep were often divided between camps on different farms. A constant refrain in Kolie's telling of this story was the hardship of those years, the doubts

and the financial worries, the strain that his heroic trek placed on his family. '*Ek het die Landbank se trappe, en dis marmer trappe daai, hol geloop* - I walked a hollow into the Landbank's stairs, and those are marble stairs.' When the rains finally came in 1988, there was a huge demand for dorpers. Kolie decided to sell 90 rams and 450 ewes in a private auction. The auction turned the dorper world upside down, bringing in five times the expected revenue. In a clear vindication of Kolie's trek, the first day of the auction alone covered the cost of his eight years on the road twice over. Kolie and Adrie were both in tears at this point in the story: '*Dis die pragsvoorbeeld van vasbyt in ons lewens* - it's the prime example of tenacity in our lives.' Kolie's problems weren't at an end though. Drought, the leveller of the arid interior, was replaced by that great leveller of the Orange River, floods. A section engineer predicted the river would burst its banks opposite Dyason's Klip upstream. The owner of Dyason's Klip asked Kolie whether he could break the retaining wall and so save his high ground. As Kolie was doomed either way, he agreed, and watched his farm wash away in the floods of 1988. '*En daar sal nog so 'n vloed wees, sy naam is Grootrivier* - and there will be another such flood, his name is Great River.'

As we were moving indoors for dinner, Kolie asked me why we were paddling the river. I told him I was writing a book on the Orange River frontier, the brown frontiersmen. '*Dan moet jy sommer nou met Oom Lukas gaan praat*,' he said, 'then you must go and talk to Oom Lukas immediately.' Kolie made a phone call, then gave me directions and the keys to his truck. 'We'll keep your food warm,' said Adrie. Oom Lukas Duran, a retired farm labourer living on Bloems Mond, was waiting for me outside his cottage. He was short, froglike, with square fingers and white stubble that looked stiff enough to grate nutmeg. No sooner had I mentioned Basterland, than Oom Lukas drew my attention to an instrument of Baster dispossession that had nothing to

do with the whites – the Baster wills, or *testamente*, as he called them. There was an unspoken rule among the Basters that all their offspring should inherit land. Farms were divided into small, often unworkable plots: '*Een plaas was soos 'n lemoen gesny* - one farm was cut like an orange so that each of the ten children had access to water.' The inheritors would battle to eke out a living for a few years then be forced to sell. '*Mense was ongeleerd, dis hoe hulle die plase verloor het. Sikspens 'n morg. Hulle drink hul plaas onder 'n bottel brandewyn uit* - people were ignorant, that's how they lost their farms. Sixpence a morgen. They drank their farms from a bottle of brandy.' Oom Lukas explained that the Loxtons had been cleverer, that their testament had held their land intact. A Kalahari farmer named Rooi Stoffel had left the farm Gous to his third generation. I told Oom Lukas that I had visited Gous and knew of the will. He grabbed my hand with his rough stumpy fingers and shook it excitedly. His wife, he said, is one of the third generation waiting to inherit. He explained that Rooi Stoffel had swopped two farms along the river for Gous: '*Hy het vooruit gesien, gesien die besigheid langs die rivier raak nou vir sy mense. Die wit man kom* - he was forward-looking, saw that prospects along the river were slim for his people. The white man was coming.' Rooi Stoffel wasn't wrong. In 1889, forty-eight of the fifty-eight farms along the north bank of the river belonged to Basters. The only farms still in Baster hands today, according to Oom Lukas, are Eenduin, Loxtonvale and Friersdale, as well as two properties entrusted to the Congregational Church – Zoovoorby and Currie's Camp. Oom Lukas also mentioned the islands of Ecksteenskuil, which, he said, the government had bought up for coloured farmers. I noticed his use of the word coloured; up to that point he had exclusively used Baster. I asked Oom Lukas whether the words were interchangeable. Apparently not: '*Voorheen was dit net Basters gewees. Oubaas het by die huismeid kinders gekry, en die Bastertjies moes vorentoe trek,*

Grootrivier toe. En so het die Baster ding maar aangegaan. Toe het daai kleurling storie aangekom. Daai storie was 'n onsmaaklike storie. Jy't niks gehou van dié nuwe woord nie, jy't net geweet van Baster af. Baster kom van blank en nie-blank, soos vandag nog wanneer 'n motorfiets langs die pad stilhou. Kyk, Baster is Baster, Griekwa is Griekwa, Boesman is Boesman, maar Kaapse kleurling is half-walg, hy skiet iets kort. Inlik, kleurling is niks nie. Toe ek in 1961 kleurling word, voel ek ek't iets verloor. Nou sê my identiteitsboekie 'Suid Afrikaanse burger.' So gaan dit maar, elke jaar iets anders - Before there were only Basters. The farmer had children with the maid, and the little Basters had to trek, all the way to the Great River. And so the Baster thing went. Then that coloured story came along. That story left a bad taste. You didn't like this new word, you only knew what Baster was. Baster comes from white and non-white, like today, still, when a motorcycle stops along the side of the road. Look, Baster is Baster, Griqua is Griqua, Bushman is Bushman, but Cape coloured is nauseating, it falls short. In fact, coloured is nothing. When I became coloured in 1961, I felt I'd lost something. Nowadays my identity book says 'South African citizen.' And so it goes, each year something different.'

Oom Lukas became coloured because of the Population Registration Act of 1950. Colouredness, though, is a lot older than apartheid. Some historians point to an embryonic sense of community amongst the Free Blacks and Free Malays, the Prize Negroes, half-caste slaves and Hottentot apprentices who lived at close quarters in pre-emancipation Cape Town. Others argue that two pieces of legislation inspired by the missionary drive of the early nineteenth century – the repeal of the vagrancy laws (Ordinance 50 of 1828) and the abolition of slavery ten years later – led to a mingling of the Khoi and the slaves, and that the coloured people subsequently emerged as a cultural unit in the 1840s. These versions of events overstate the

No. 50.

G.  R.

(Signed) RICH. BOURKE.

ORDINANCE

Of His Honor the Lieutenant-Governor in Council,

For improving the Condition of Hottentots and other free Persons of colour at the Cape of Good Hope, and for consolidating and amending the Laws affecting those Persons.

available evidence. At best, one can say that the Khoisan, Baster and slave histories began to converge after emancipation and that by mid-century these peoples were sometimes collectively referred to as coloured. In the official documents of the nineteenth century, though, coloured meant non-European. Under the Transvaal Liquor Law of 1898, for instance, a coloured person was 'any African or Asiatic Native or coloured American or St. Helena person, Coolie or Chinaman, whether male or female.' Only in 1904 did the term coloured for the first time officially exclude black South Africans. The Cape census of that year claimed there were three 'clearly defined race groups in this colony, White, Bantu and Coloured.' This last category was defined as 'all intermediate shades between the first two' – a negative definition that has never really been improved upon. Coloured started out as, and has remained, a residual category created for administrative purposes.

The missionaries spawned a so-called liberal tradition in Cape politics, and in 1853 non-European males were granted a limited franchise. Some of the arguments in favour of the franchise weren't liberal in the least: 'I would rather meet the Hottentot at the hustings voting for his representative,' suggested the Attorney General of the Cape, 'than meet the Hottentot in the wilds with a gun on his shoulder.' The discovery of diamonds and gold in the 1870s and 80s put paid to any talk of benevolence and moral uplift, and measures were taken to transform what was left of the free peasantry into a cheap labour

supply. In 1894 Cecil John Rhodes presented the Glen Grey Act to the Cape parliament. The Act was designed, he explained, to force 'kaffirs' into wage labour, by first limiting them to small uneconomic lots, and then imposing a labour tax on the unemployed. While this piece of legislation, a clear forerunner to apartheid, hardened the colour line for economic reasons, Social Darwinism hardened it for ideological reasons. The Darwinists used rebellions in India and Jamaica to argue that the 'lower races' were ungrateful savages who would soon disappear from the face of the earth and that civilising missions, ultimately, were a waste of time. Poor whites in the Colony used these arguments to give racist voice to their class frustrations. In the face of this growing prejudice, the coloured elite themselves adopted the language of Social Darwinism, claiming that 'respectable coloured men' should not be grouped with the 'barbarous native.' This was something of a new departure in coloured affairs. Previously coloureds had been careful not to establish a separate political identity, so as not to jeopardise their chances of gaining admission to colonial society. Historian Mohamed Adhikari points to the Catch-22 in which the coloured community now found itself. In order to protect their status of relative privilege *vis-à-vis* Africans, coloureds chose to emphasise their partial descent from the colonists. Yet it was precisely this racial hybridity that the colonists found repugnant. In fact, this scenario strikes me as more lose-lose than Catch-22: in the very act of sacrificing their Africanness to collaborate with the colonists, the coloured people demoted themselves into second class subjects of the state.

Several factors contributed to the emergence of a distinct coloured identity during the years surrounding the Anglo-Boer war. The British used the ill-treatment of coloureds in the republics as part of their war propaganda and promised that victory would bring 'equal laws, equal liberty.' For the coloured population in and around Cape

Town the war became a crusade for civil rights in the republics and they enlisted in their droves. 'These natives,' observed a British soldier in 1900, 'think this war to be their own.' Abraham Esau, a coloured blacksmith from Calvinia was dragged behind horses by a Boer commando for refusing to renounce his loyalty to the Crown. Manie Maritz's commando massacred forty-six Basters at Leliefontein after Barnabas Links supposedly shouted 'You bastard, don't you speak that way about my Queen' and hit Maritz over the head with a *knopkierie*. British loyalty to the coloureds proved less stout. When hostilities ceased the British closed ranks with the Boers, agreeing that there should be no franchise rights for coloureds or blacks in the annexed republics. In short, the British took precisely the path Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain had cautioned against: 'We cannot consent to purchase a shameful peace by leaving the coloured population in the position in which they stood before the war.' The bitter disappointment of this betrayal, perhaps more than any other event during these years of accelerated change, shaped the coloured people's sense of themselves as a group apart. Their separateness was only heightened when displaced Afrikaners and Africans crowded into the cities after the war.

The colonial authorities encouraged the coloured people to see themselves as occupying an intermediate position between black and white South Africans. 'Our object,' noted Lord Selborne, High Commissioner to the Cape from 1905 to 1910, 'should be to teach the Coloured people to give their support to the white population. It seems to me sheer folly to classify them with Natives, and by treating them as Natives to force them away from their natural allegiance with the whites and into making common cause with the Natives.' This divide-and-rule strategy, which did much to shape a distinct coloured identity in the first half of the twentieth century, found its logical conclusion in apartheid. The Nationalists sharpened racial boundaries, and then

played off the races so formed against one another. They exempted coloureds from the pass laws, gave them labour preference in the Cape, offered them incremental benefits. Colouredness flourished as people sought to escape the deeper humiliation and injustice being doled out to blacks. It lost popularity in the 1960s, though, with the rise of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness movement, which taught that everyone who wasn't white was black. Since 1994 colouredness has been back in vogue.

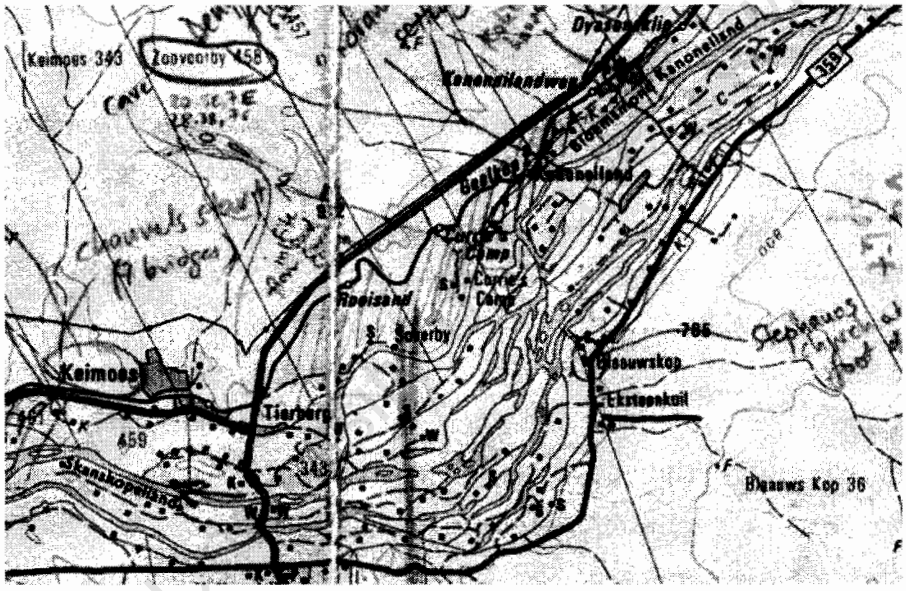
Reinventing coloured identity is something of a boom industry at present, with researchers and entertainers looking to stimulate people's pride in their Khoisan and slave pasts. Colouredness, they argue, has been self-defined – the shared historical experience of the Dutch, British, Madagascans, Malaysians and Khoisan at the Cape has given rise to a unique and instantly recognisable culture. I would like to believe this. When I look around me, though, it seems that the older and less popular view of coloured identity as an outcome of racist ideology and divide-and-rule politics squares better with life on the ground. For one, modern coloured identity is firmly rooted in western tradition. The Malay contribution, beyond a handful of words and one or two foods, only really applies to the Cape Muslim community. The Khoisan contribution is even smaller. Pre-conquest societies such as the /Xam, the Cochoqua, the Attaqua, the Einiqua and the Korana have been so thoroughly atomised as to leave hardly a cultural trace. Precisely because colouredness has been largely imposed by outsiders, so it seems to me, there is a powerful sense among the people so called that this colonial label doesn't express the full range of their experience here in southern Africa. Why else would rural people such as Oom Lukas Duraan cling to a Baster, Griqua or Nama identity? Why do a small but significant number of urban coloureds still aspire to whiteness, or give themselves over to gangs? Why is there is a steady stream of buses and cars from Mitchell's Plain,

Mannenberg, Bonteheuwel and Kuilsrivier to the Baxter Theatre to watch shows such as *District Six*, *Vatmaar*, *Karoo Kitaar Blues*, *Suip*, *Kat and the Kings*, *Fiela se Kind*, *Die Ballade van Koos Sas*? Why does funny-man Mark Lottering – who's not all that funny – fill theatres for months on end with shows such as *From the Cape Flats with Love*? More compelling than his humour, I suspect, is his take on what it means to be coloured today.

After a leisurely breakfast with the Strausses, we put onto the water at ten and hugged the north bank of Kanoneiland. I was still on a high from my chat with Oom Lukas. During the first two weeks of our trip, it had felt as if I had all these stories – *God's Stepchildren*, Schmidtsdrif, the Eiselen Line – but that they didn't really relate to a greater whole. Now that we had passed Upington, the river appeared to be pulling in these disparate strands. The way Koranaland became Gordonia, Gordonia became Basterland, the way Baster identity fed into the broader issue of coloured identity. My story would never be comprehensive, of course – so much depended on whom we had met, on whom we would meet. But it seemed to me that the deeper we travelled into the north-west, a region J.S. Marais calls 'the cradle of the Bastard population,' the more our encounters would begin to cohere. More and more often now a chat with someone like Kolie Strauss would lead to an encounter with someone like Lukas Duraan. What I sensed, I suppose, as we glided past stately camelthorns, the sunlight fracturing in the drops of water that slid down our blades, was the transparency of the dry reaches up ahead, their inability to conceal their story.

Eben Mocke had warned us that once we rounded the seventeen-kilometre-long Kanoneiland we should press hard for the south bank of the river to avoid Miggie Falls. As our stream gradually

frayed into myriad channels, we realised that this was easily said, less easily done. We picked our way along overgrown waterways slowed by low weirs, branching left wherever we could. The bush was alive – small buck, monkeys, birds. I took a GPS reading after an hour. We were in the middle of a three-kilometre-wide delta in the lee of Kanoneiland, far from the left bank with no way of getting to it. Our map showed a mess of small islands. Downstream of us the delta bulged out to seven kilometers, twenty-odd channels. The Orange, Eben had cautioned, was at its widest and wildest below Kanoneiland.



The tangle of camelthorn, willow and tamarisk gave way to a corridor of densely packed reeds. Our stream perked up and embarked on a series of tight, tricky rapids. There was no chance to scout as we hurtled around blind corners, picking up pace all the time. Like kids in a hot car, we whooshed into the unknown, the wind in our hair and god on our side. When I came to the first stretch of flat water for a kilometre, I slid easily across it to the headwaters of a rapid that vanished around the next corner. As I entered the tug of the current a

small voice made me reach for a handful of reeds. You might as well scout, it said, now that you've got the chance. In the end, though, it was Laurence who set off over rock and reed. It took him fifteen minutes to beat a path to the river downstream. He returned with large eyes. The rapid on the corner fed into the headwaters of Miggie Falls! We ate a shadeless lunch in the 'normal forty' that had been predicted for Upington that day. It cost us two hours of ropework and portaging to get the laden boats over rocks and through reeds to the mainstream below Miggie. This gnarly rapid, I now saw, drops five metres at forty-five degrees to the horizontal. A thick fog of *miggies* - small midge-like insects swarmed above the thrashing water.

We camped that evening by the silence and thunder of yet another weir. 'I love the explosion of camp,' said Chris, as we reached deep into our boats, pulled out food and gear, removed our sleeping bags and clothes from the fertilizer bags into which we had stuffed them. Laurence found a bath spot below the weir, I got the fire going, Chris chopped onion, tomato, green pepper, salami, olives and peppadews for his couscous *nqush*. Things were so much more relaxed between us now. It had been hot, we had worked hard, we had covered a disappointing twenty-seven kilometres, and yet there had been no needle or bicker, not once that day had we shifted our fears and frustrations onto one another. Upington had been crucial. It had been like a beacon to us, so much had depended upon our getting there. Now everything seemed downhill – we could do this thing, we could get to the sea. As I bent over forwards to pick up kindling, it occurred to me that my back had been strong for two days now, that I hadn't taken anti-inflammatories since Upington. Could it be that my body had been responding to fear, to that ever-present fear of failure, of not finishing what I've started?

'This trip is a hobo experience,' announced Chris, removing the pot from the fire. 'Just look at me. I'm filthy. My hands are full of sticky

couscous, pot grease and river mud. I love it.' I looked at Chris, his filthy hands, his filthy clothes, his irrepressible sense of wellness. This was our world. We were moving so easily in it. I sat down on the river bank with my food, looked out over the dark expanse of water slipping forever over the weir. We were coming to accept the indifference of the river, I realised, the fact that it would barrel on relentlessly whether we were here or not. I thought back to the piece of driftwood I had seen at Orania. It would almost have reached the sea by now. Time on the water was all that mattered, time on the water and the patience of wood.

Chris powered along in the clear morning sun, the red of his paddle top thrown into brilliant relief by the deep shade of the treed banks, his happy-yellow boat reflected and refracted in the wave that angled out from his bow. We weren't fooled by this tranquil reach, however. Our map showed that it would narrow into the thinnest of blue lines a few kilometres above Friersdale. And sure enough, after two low weirs, the banks started to tend towards one another, reeds again took over from the trees, and the gradient picked up. Within half a kilometre we were in the same situation as the previous day, hemmed in, unable to scout, rattling down a narrow staircase rapid. Rounding a bend, we were faced with a weir which we had no choice but to shoot, followed by another bouncy ride which left Chris stranded on a rock mid-channel. Laurence and I found a flat rock on which to beach. The river curled from view up ahead. Laurence waded to the corner. He returned with news of a rapid, steep but shootable. The river rushed through a sharp V formed by two large boulders, he said, dropped a metre or two. There were more features downstream, but if we followed our noses, Lol assured us, we'd be alright. Chris vanished around the corner in the single. We gave him twenty seconds then

followed. The turn proved too tight for the double and we were swept broadside across the V. We leaned hard downstream to prevent the boat filling with water, then climbed out into the full force of the current. It felt strange, standing there clinging to the boat, motionless in the midst of such powerful swirling forces. Laurence passed me his paddle. He made his way to the nose and tried to dislodge it. I tugged at the tail. A sudden surge of water filled the front cockpit and carried off Laurence's watertight camera box and lifejacket. As they were swept down between the boulders, the nose of the double popped free and began to swing into the V. 'Let go!' shouted Laurence and grabbed at a trailing rope. As the heavy boat picked up momentum over the drop, the rope ran out of slack and plucked him from behind his boulder. I watched, helpless, as Laurence banged and bounced his way downstream, corkscrewing at the end of a piece of rope behind a runaway kayak. He displayed the courage of those whalers of old, who hung on grimly as a harpooned whale whisked their little skiffs on a Nantucket sleigh-ride into the unknown. As Laurence and his yellow whale bounced around a distant corner, I was left alone, waist-deep in a strong current, with a couple of paddles over my shoulder and a big drop in front of me. I took a moment to consider my situation, the absurdity of it, the peril. Then I plunged through the V. Light, dark, down spluttering, white and up. I took a breath and then the paddles whipped me forwards, tumbled and twisted me this way and that. I was slammed into rocks, gulped for air when I could. I had no chance of assuming the safety position – feet first, legs slightly bent. Each time I righted myself, the wing paddles bit the water again and I lurched head first after them. The rapid was four feet deep, fast, and seemingly endless. My situation improved when I discovered, some hundred metres into the ride, that I could control the paddles better if I held them at one end. With my head above water now, I began to spot our debris. I held the paddles at an angle and veered

across to a lifejacket trapped in an eddy near the bank, to a seat cushion pinned in the reeds, a bag of oranges bobbing in slower water. I was very happy to see Chris around the next corner. He was safe. And I'd be able to offload some gear. Chris was standing waist-deep against the reeds on the far bank, holding the nose of his kayak into the rapid. It didn't look like abating any time soon. We managed to empty the boat of water and then concocted the mad plan of his giving me a lift downstream. I held onto the tail of the boat and we swung the nose into the current. I sprawled on the aft deck for a wild and wobbly ride that ended, predictably enough, in capsize. Chris was swept off downstream with the boat, while I stayed behind with the paddles which were pinned under a rock. When I eventually managed to extricate them, they ripped me downstream again. Chris, battling to pull a boatful of water up onto a smooth boulder, was treated to a grandstand view of me 'aah aah ooh aah!'-ing down a shallow, rocky section, one hand clutching the paddles, the other trying to protect my cocyx. He slid off his rock to join me and the two of us plus boat were swept through a dogleg to the left, and then, thirty metres on, into a huge upwelling of water as the river now hooked sharply back to the right. The kayak and I were deposited onto a rocky ledge, while Chris was swept under some nasty looking branches. His foot jammed between two submerged rocks and he was pushed over forwards. He managed to wrench his foot free and pick his way to the bank. Alhough he had twisted his ankle, and lost a shoe, Chris was lucky – drowning by foot entrapment is one of the commonest causes of deaths on rivers.

Forty metres ahead of us the rapid flowed under a bridge and into a long broad pool. Chris and I had survived the adventure. But where was Laurence? We hadn't seen him for half an hour. Chris climbed up onto the bridge, paced back and forth calling Lol's name. He was about to give up when Laurence swam out from the dense

green bank some way downstream. Far from hearing Chris's call, he later told us, he had swum out for a bag of tomatoes that had been drifting past. Laurence had lost the double kayak half-way down the rapid and only caught up with it in the pool. After dragging it to the bank, he had swum out repeatedly for items floating by – a green pepper, suncream, a hat, a cup kept afloat by the packet of teabags stuffed inside it. We assessed the damage. Lost: three waterbottles, one Swiss army knife, one shoe, some food. Flooded: Laurence's camera. Injured: Chris's ankle. Broken: the double kayak's rudder. Battered: the lid of our cookset, which had been hanging from the front cockpit of the double and now sported more peaks and troughs than the Richtersveld.

The river remained flat for an hour. Then we saw why. A massive weir dams the Orange as it passes through the Neus hills. A canal strikes off downstream from the left-hand edge of the weir, irrigates the vineyards of the south bank for fifty kilometres – Kakamas, Marchand, Augrabies. A hundred metres below Neus weir the Orange plunges over a three metre fall. Even the chicken run river-left is a gnarly grade four rapid. This was going to be a long portage. We were on the point of unpacking the boats, when Laurence spotted a twenty-litre plastic bottle. He slipped into scout mode and fashioned a sled. We hauled the boats three hundred metres along a gravel track in forty-odd degrees of heat, then roped them down a forty degree scree incline to the water below.

The first canal to be led from the river at Neus was dug by 'poor whites.' When the already harsh environment of the northern Cape was exacerbated, in the 1890s, by drought, locusts and the rinderpest,

the Dutch Reformed Church launched their *Arbeidskolonie-Kommissie* - Labour Colony Commission to investigate the plight of landless and poverty-stricken whites. Reverend Schröder suggested that a labour colony might be established on the farms Neus, Zoetap and Kakamas on the south bank of the Orange River. When the government granted

this land to the church, Schröder turned his back on his Baster congregation at Upington and took up the post of Superintendent at Kakamas. In July 1898 work commenced on the south furrow at De Neus. 'Our work hours,' recalls one of the settlers who dug the canal with pick and shovel for 3/- a day, 'were from six in the morning to six in the evening with a pause of one hour for a midday meal. We advanced about a quarter of a mile a day, if all went well. Kakamas is known for its intolerable heat, and the work was no child's play.' The poor whites were assisted by even poorer coloureds, who toiled alongside them for a fraction of their meagre pay.

Deneys Reitz, on commando with Smuts in the northern Cape during the Anglo-Boer war, arrived at Kakamas after a three-hundred-mile ride across Bushmanland: 'We travelled mostly at night to avoid the blazing heat of day, and at length reached Kakamas, a small irrigation colony founded by the Dutch church on the south bank of the Orange River. The settlement was still in its infancy, and the inhabitants lived in rude huts and shelters made of grass and reeds, but they had built a canal from the river, and had established fields and orchards so successfully that the place had become a supply depot for

the surrounding districts. We spent a pleasant fortnight here, eating fruit and swimming in the river every day.'

By the time the south furrow was completed in 1906, the Kakamasers were growing a number of crops – maize and wheat, peas and beans, cotton, lentils, apricots, sultanas and citrus. Though the settlement prospered, its inhabitants battled to shake off their desperate poverty. They hired their land from the church and were subject to endless regulations. The *Arbeidskolonie-Kommissie* (A.K.K.) argued that the rehabilitation of the poor called for strict discipline. It soon became apparent, however, that they were running the colony according to ruthless business principles. The colonists were forced to sell their produce to the church in exchange for vouchers which were redeemable only at the extortionate A.K.K. shops. Anybody caught visiting the cheaper Jewish trading stores stood a good chance of being expelled from the colony. The church remained true to the words it had engraved on the wall of the Kakamas mill: '*Voorwaar, voorwaar, hier sal jy nie uitgaan voordat jy die laaste penning betaal het nie* - verily, verily, you won't leave here until you've paid the last penny.'

In 1943, forty years after Reitz first talked of established orchards and rude huts, the *Suiderstem* reported: ''*n Mens ry deur Kakamas waar die skoot van die aarde so swanger is van die ryk oes* - one drives through Kakamas where the lap of the earth is heavy with harvest; it feels as if one could immediately set to work in the rich dark soils here on the banks of the Orange River. Yet inbetween this natural wealth one comes across such shocking poverty that one overwhelming question presents itself: how is it that such rich earth delivers so much poverty?' Spurred on by his friend A.D. Collins, a school teacher in Kakamas, Andrew Meintjes Conroy, a prominent merino farmer and Minister of Lands and Irrigation in the Smuts cabinet, took up the plight of the labour colonists. He was a powerful

orator and launched a scathing attack on the Dutch Reformed Church's policy at Kakamas in Parliament on 18 May 1945: 'The honourable member for Gordonia asked me yesterday whether I stood by what he called my accusation in connection with the Church, and I said "Yes." I made the accusation that excessive profits were made and secondly that a collosal capital had been accumulated from these profits. I said that the situation had developed whereby the interests of the Church, which still had the A.K.K. in Kakamas, were almost exclusively in the shops they had there. The shops were their greatest interest in Kakamas. In addition I said that the Church uses Kakamas as a tax machine and that they farm with the colonists as I farm with my sheep. I repeat that. They farm with the colonists as I farm with my sheep. I would now like to add that the only difference is that once I have shorn my sheep, I care for them, but do they care for the colonists after taking so much from them?' The labour colonists received 5/6d a day, said Conroy. The bulk of this was paid for by the government, while the A.K.K., which was sitting on an accumulated profit of £213 000, provided only 10d. 'Yet, so long as the labourers kept coming, the A.K.K. was there with its shop to get its hands on the 5/6d.' The shop at Rhenosterkop, today Augrabies, showed a net profit of £10 500 in the six years between 1937 and 1943 and yet, so continued Conroy's rant in parliament, the colonists lived in reed huts plastered with mud and slept under wool bags. 'I think I have provided enough evidence,' he concluded, 'to support my accusation that the A.K.K., that the Church, cares more for its shops and shop-profits than it does for the Kingdom of Heaven.'

Conroy's charges of tax evasion, semi-slavery and farming the Kakamas labour colonists like sheep landed him in a lawsuit which went to the Appeal Court. He was ostracised for what was perceived as an attack on the church itself. Conroy, however, remained a member of the Dutch Reformed Church throughout the affair. In fact,

such is the pull of religion on the Afrikaner, that the Kakamasers, too, despite a bitter struggle for title to their land, remained loyal to their church. As a 77-year-old inhabitant of Kakamas told me: '*Dit was 'n harde blerrie ding, 'n bloedstryd tussen die kerk, die regering en die boere. Jy weet mos hoe die hof smaak* - it was a hard bloody thing, a blood-feud between the church, the government and the farmers. You know what court tastes like.'

We set up camp on a stretch of sun-baked clay, sticky in places, a few kilometres downstream of Kakamas. I noticed a little muscle pop out from between two of Laurence's ribs each time he blew into his sleeping mat. This is what interests me here on the river, I remember thinking. Not where I should walk the dogs today, or whether the plumber has returned my call, or what I'm doing on Friday night. But the pulsing of a little muscle used to inflate a sleeping mat; the flash of static when I pull my fleece over my head after dark; where next to make an incision in my paddle booties so as to improve their drainage and ventilation. At dusk we were treated to a special incandescence, as if the tight-skinned river were the molten flow from some precious metal forge. It rained that night, a gentle patter on the clay. Laurence rigged a tarp between the boats. Come morning, Chris was first to emerge from our low-roofed home. He filled a billie can with water, placed it on the cooker, sat down and lit a cigarette. My thoughts drifted to Hendrik Wikar's encounter with a group of Khoi in this area: 'The Hottentots came to meet us with slaughter sheep, shouting greetings from afar with joy at the prospect of getting something to smoke. *Een span tobak en een hoed vol dagga* - a span of tobacco and a hat full of marijuana was what they asked for a sheep, but we gave them a little more.' Wikar describes at length how the Korana smoked their *dagga*: 'They moisten the clayey ground and work it until it becomes sticky, then on either side they insert two sticks slantingly and right opposite each other and when these have been

pulled out they test to see whether the sticks have met and whether the air can be drawn through; then they pour in a little water. One of the holes is plugged with tobacco and the smoker lies on his stomach drawing in the smoke from the other hole, while another man lights the tobacco.' Oupa Boesman, the 87-year-old farm labourer I met on my travels through Bushmanland, concurs: '*Kyk, die Korana maak hulle 'n aar, so 'n grondpyp. Hulle het hulle so deur die grond laf gerook* - look, the Korana made themselves a vein, a ground pipe. They smoked themselves silly through the ground.' I suggested to Chris that we re-enact 1778. We certainly didn't have enough *dagga* to fill a hat, but our stash would stretch to a morning smoke, Khoi style. The clay was soft from the rain, and we needed only one curved stick to construct a tunnel. Chris positioned himself at the danger end, while I manned the lighter.

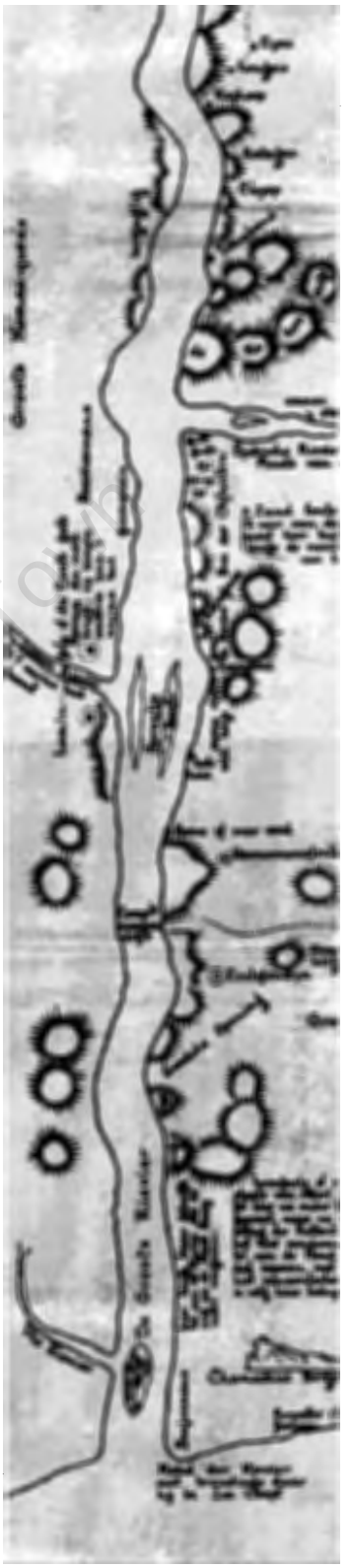
The first direct reference to *Cannabis sativa* as a psychoactive agent appears in the writings of the Chinese emperor Shen Nung, around 2700 B.C. Its use gradually spread west and by 1200 A.D. hashish smoking was popular throughout the Middle East. In the 1300s Arab traders introduced cannabis to the east coast of Africa.

When the Portuguese occupied Mozambique they established long distance trade routes that spread out from Delagoa Bay across the highveld to the Sotho-Tswana. Cannabis and beads left the port, ivory arrived from inland. The Sotho-Tswana, reports Wikar, visited the Korana of the Orange each year to obtain cattle and riding-oxen: 'This is the way they trade: for a heifer they give eight assegaais, an axe and an awl, a small bag of tobacco and a small bag of dagga, and for a bull or an ox, five assegaais plus all the other things as for a heifer.'

The lid of the billie can started to rattle. Chris looked up from the pipe, shook his head once or twice, blinked deliberately, and crawled over to the cooker. He added three spoons of coffee, waited for it to froth, added sugar, waited for it to froth again. Israeli-style he called it. I sat on the bank with my bowl of coffee and looked out over the brown water. Much of what we know of the early social history of this river, I realised, is due to Wikar. Soon after his visit there was an influx of outsiders to the Orange River frontier. Renegade settlers such as Jan Bloem and Baster and Oorlam gangs led by the likes of Jager Afrikaner and Cupido Roggeveld preyed mercilessly on the Einiqua and Korana. By the time the Reverend John Campbell visited the river in 1813, the Einiqua, or People of the River, had disappeared as a cultural entity.

Hendrik Jacob Wikar, a Swede in the service of the Dutch East India Company, arrived at the Cape in 1773. He took to gambling and ran up large debts. In 1775 he deserted and fled north, 'not anticipating all the peril and wretchedness I must encounter during the 4 years and 6 months I remained undetected.' Wikar's journal commences in September 1778 at Gū-daos, now corrupted to Goodhouse, a ford on the banks of the Gariep. He followed the river upstream for five hundred kilometres, turning around at Koegas. On his return from a second long journey upriver, Wikar met 'Mr. Gordon, who would very much liked to have taken me along with him.' Wikar,

however, was returning to the Cape. He had offered Governor van Plettenberg his journal and a map of the river in exchange for an official pardon. Wikar writes at length about the lifestyles, customs and beliefs of the Einiqua and the Korana. Both groups, he reports, were predominantly herders. The only evidence he found of cultivation was 'sown dagga, which grew most luxuriant here.' He quizzed the Einiqua on local geography. In response to a question about the source of the Orange, they asked him whether he was able to explain where the sky ended. Wikar's observations on rites of passage and courting rituals are spiced up with accounts of wife swopping and obese Namaqua milk-drinkers, as well as a report that 'the Eynikkoa and Korakkoa cut out one testicle – N.B. the left – contending that by this means their running speed is improved.' This observation belongs to the dubious tradition amongst early visitors to the Cape of focussing on Khoi genitals. George Meister, for instance, noted in 1677 that 'the men have a member surprisingly longer than that of Europeans, so that it resembles the organ of a young bull.' The women, he reports, are often taken for hermaphrodites 'because of a supra membrum genital, a hanging flap a quarter ell long, like a wattle of a turkey's beak.' Concerned perhaps that readers



might wonder how he came by such information, Meister quickly adds that 'since also they are extreme lovers of the noble weed nicotine or tobacco, these charming females will show an inquisitive and salacious amateur everything that he may ask for, for a pipeful of tobacco.'

Hendrik Wikar, strangely, was but one of three celebrated Swedes to travel the Cape in the 1770s. Carl Thunberg and Anders Sparrman arrived, on separate ships, in April 1772. Thunberg, a Doctor of Physic from the University of Uppsala, embarked on three long journeys into the southern African interior and is still known today as the Father of Cape Botany. Sparrman also studied medicine at Uppsala. Like most doctors two hundred years ago, he spent much of his time botanising. While at the Cape, Sparrman had the good fortune of being invited to sail as assistant naturalist on board the *Resolution* with Captain Cook. During his 28 month journey, the Resolution made history as the first ship to circumnavigate the globe in an easterly direction. On 21 March 1775, in Cape Town, Cook and his crew became the first travellers to repeat a day. In July of that year Sparrman set off on an inland journey that was to last ten months. His *A Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and around the World, but chiefly into the country of the Hottentots and Caffres* (1783) was translated from the original Swedish into English, German and French, and ran through several printings. Robert Gordon took exception. Given his vastly greater travel achievements, he was probably annoyed at the popularity of Sparrman's two volumes. His litany of scorn runs to twelve folio pages and contains such gems as: '...if a lion really roard near them I should not be wondered if they had dirtied their breeches, and fainted.'

V

The dominant feature of the Augrabies Falls is not water but rock. Boulders the size of houses litter the granite. The river vanishes into labyrinthine channels, then reappears to plunge ninety metres and sluice away down a narrow chasm. The walls of the chasm tremble as the full force of the Orange thunders white over the sheer polished grey of the granite.

'Higher than the Victoria Falls,' writes Fred Cornell in *The Glamour of Prospecting* (1920), 'and more than double the height of Niagara, the

Great Falls of the Orange lack the spectacular beauty of either of its famous rivals... the impression they leave is of terror rather than pleasure, of awe rather than of beauty. There is no 'fern forest' such as lends romance to the Zambesi fall; on all sides nothing but riven, shattered rock, sheer precipice, and giant buttress, a nightmare of barrenness, of desolation so appalling that one might well be standing in some other planet, some dead world from which all sign of life had long since vanished.'

We spent our last night above the falls at the Kalahari Adventure Centre. This reeded camp, built around a windmill with a low cement dam, is a haven for backpackers, paddlers, lovers of desert. The manager, Andrew Hockley, invited us to join a rafting trip the next morning. It was called The Rush, he said, and ended three hundred metres above the falls. Chris offered to do the shopping – food, whisky, duct tape. He had lost his shoes during our channel fiasco above Neus and needed to buy a new pair. This freed up Laurence and me to go paddling. The rapids were small and playful. I still managed, though, to pick up my worst injury of the trip. I underestimated the current while ferry-gliding across the headwaters of Blind Faith, and got sucked into the rapid backwards. I capsized while trying to turn, rolled up, fell over again. The back of my helmet rapped along the stony riverbed and then a sharp rock smashed into my shoulder. I was lucky to escape serious injury – a week later all I had to show for the ordeal was a scar the shape of the Iberian peninsula. Jakes, one of our guides, treated us to a display of how white water should be handled. He was in a playboat, a very short plastic kayak. He searched out holes in which to dance with the water, slip its grip then dive and emerge like a dolphin at Sea World. A hole is basically a recirculating vortex formed below a ledge or flat rock. Like a whirlpool laid horizontal, an excess of piled water forever falls back on itself. Most kayakers will do anything to avoid getting trapped

in a hole, but Jakes actively searches for them – the bigger the foam pile the better. He surfed and got vertical, executed 360-degree flatspins, popped an ender, pirouetted and cartwheeled, threw his paddle away and capsized, rolled back up with his hands. His aerial manoeuvres needed work, he said, his helixes and donkey flips, Pan Ams, space godzillas.

We portaged our boats to the National Parks visitor centre, then headed back out into the riot heat of the granite. Technicoloured lizards darted between patches of shade or did press-ups in the full glare of the sun. Straining against the tourist fences that line the southern edge of the chasm, I watched the Orange hurtle from its narrow channel. It crashed onto a ledge thirty metres down and mushroomed out in a perpetual slow-motion explosion before falling once more for sixty clear metres. I felt shamed, somehow, by this savage display – the rock and the thunder, the sun and the ricocheting heat, the juxtaposition of water and shattering aridity.

Hendrik Wikar left us the first written record of Augrabies. Of the falls themselves he has little more to say than '*de magtige groote waterval* - the mighty big waterfall.' He does add, however, that sometimes when hippos ventured into the current above the falls they were swept off their feet and carried over the cataract, breaking their backbones. The Einiqua would then climb down and haul them out. It wasn't until 1824 that a European again saw the falls. In fact George Thompson, a Cape Town merchant, was long thought to have 'discovered' them, as Wikar's journal was only published in 1916. Thompson proved somewhat more effusive than Wikar on first encountering the falls. His Korana guides led him to a projecting rock 'where a scene burst upon me, surpassing my most sanguine expectations. The whole water of the river... descends at once in a magnificent cascade of fully four hundred feet in height. ...the astounding roar of the waterfall, and the tumultous boiling and whirling

of the stream below, striving to escape along its deep, dark, and narrow path, formed altogether a combination of beauty and grandeur, such as I never before witnessed.' Thompson christened the falls King George's Cataract. Fortunately the indigenous name Augrabies, from the Nama *!oukurubes* - noise-making place, has prevailed.

Thompson found the terrain downstream of Augrabies rugged and inaccessible, and so made cross-country for Pella. A terrifying thirst spread out to the east and west of this mission station situated on a southward loop of the river. Thompson and his party suffered terrible depredations, running out of food and water and losing several horses. They eventually overnighted at a spring near Pella. 'I listened eagerly,' so writes Thompson, 'for the crowing of cocks, the bark of dogs, the lowing of cattle, or some other cheering evidence of the neighbourhood of men. But all was still and silent.' The missionaries and their congregation had left because of drought and crop failure. Convinced that he was 'doomed to perish for want in this drear and desolate country,' Thompson found sustenance from an unexpected quarter: 'I returned to the Hottentots, and found them, to my surprise, cooking something on the embers. On inquiry, I found it was a piece of zebra skin, which we had brought with us, to make shoes for the feet of the horses lamed by the flinty roads. This skin, having been beaten between two stones to make it tender, and the hair singed off, I joined them at breakfast on it, and found considerable relief from this sorry fare, coarse, and unpalatable as it was.'

The most colourful of the early European visits to Augrabies is surely that of Gilarmi A. Farini and his acrobat son Lulu. Farini, born William Hunt, was an American showman who had walked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He devotes several pages of *Through the Kalahari Desert: a narrative of a journey with gun, camera and notebook to Lake N'Gami and back* (1886) to his and Lulu's exploration of the Augrabies gorge. The water must have been high at

the time of their visit, for they chose to name the area The Hundred Falls. They christened the main falls Hercules, a name both suggestive of its size, as well as in honour of the Governor of the Cape, Sir Hercules Robinson. Other names included Farini Falls, Lulu Falls and I'll-vatch-it Falls, this last being the nickname of their German companion who watched over their possessions. Lulu was the first person to photograph the Augrabies Falls. He decided that the best vantage point was from a rocky ledge 'about a hundred yards sheer down an almost perpendicular precipice, the face of which was as smooth as glass.' Farini and Lulu supplemented what rope they had with 'koodoo-hide ox-straps.' They climbed down to the ledge, and I'll-vatch-it roped the camera, bellows, plates and tripod down after them. 'There are not many photographers who gymnast as well,' observes Lulu, 'and one needs to be both to get a picture of the fall from this point.'

It is a pity that Farini chose to illustrate his book with sketches based on Lulu's photographs, rather than the photographs themselves. The sketch of 'The Hercules Falls at Half Flood' proves that they visited the region, but not that the gymnastic photo-shoot ever took place. And there is good reason to question Farini's version of events. His book is riddled with errors and inconsistencies. Many of the episodes fall somewhere between a showman's sense of the dramatic and deliberate deceit. Indeed, the very title has been called into question. Professor John Clement of the University of the Witwatersrand studied the passenger lists of ships and concluded, based on the length of their stay, that the Farinis couldn't possibly have travelled all the way to Lake Ngami. The frontispiece to *Through the Kalahari Desert*, in which the self-styled Farini the Great strikes the extrovert pose of a Victorian impresario, is nothing if not revealing.

Like so many before him, Farini was lured to southern Africa by the promise of diamonds. In 1884 he held an exhibit at the Royal

Westminster Aquarium, London, entitled 'Farini's African Pygmies or Dwarf Earthmen, From the Interior of South Africa.' On display were six San, whom he paraded under names such as *N'co N'qui*, *N'arbecy* and *N'fim N'fom.* Their minder, a man of Khoisan and European ancestry named Gert Louw, told Farini of rich diamond deposits in the Kalahari. Farini visited southern Africa the following year. On his trip through the Kalahari, with Louw as his guide, Farini claimed to have discovered a Lost City somewhere north of the Nossob River. Twenty-five subsequent expeditions failed to find any trace of it. In 1964 Professor Clement laid the ghost to rest. He showed that Farini's sketches of ancient walls – again no photographs – bore an uncanny resemblance to natural rock formations near Hakskeenpan, far to the south. It appears that the regular weathering of these rocks inspired Farini to improve upon them, and relocate them further north.

Twenty years after Lulu Farini's pioneering photographs, Fred Cornell shot the first film footage. He filmed the main falls from a rocky ledge so small that the third leg of his tripod hung out over the precipice. Another eventful visit was that of Deneys Reitz. He climbed down a crevice in the walls of the gorge to a point some four hundred yards below the falls. He then swam upstream and clambered into a vast cavern behind the falls. Reitz, ever the adventurer, was Minister of Lands at the time.

National Parks gave us permission to launch at Echo corner, fourteen kilometres below the falls. Perhaps the 1999 Camel White Water Challenge had set something of a precedent. This international rafting competition, which saw teams sprinting downstream through grade three and four rapids with names like Timewarp, G-Force and Anticipation, had taken out at Echo. The rapids above the Camel course are more serious, generally grade five, and higher up, just below the falls, there are three grade sixes – unrunnable, that is, without risk of death. One of Andrew Hockley's guides gave us a ride to our put-in. Outside the town of Augrabies we passed a sign warning 'You are now entering a warzone against chaos, crime, laziness and poverty.' We entered the Park, drove past quiver trees on gravel plains, past exfoliation domes and the otherworldliness of Moon Rock to a look-out point at Echo corner. A steep track led down the side of the gorge to the river. We portaged in stages, first the food to the shade of an acacia, then bags full of gear, finally the boats. After the labour – the stumbles and curses, the dust-dry heat – the reward. The next hour of river was the most powerful of our trip. The deeply incised gorge towering overhead, brown-black and grey, its crest burnt to yellow in late afternoon sun. The silence and majesty of river-rock-sky, the elements at large.

Emerging from the granite splendour of the Augrabies gorge, we encountered the no less remarkable Patrick Bosman. He was sitting on the north bank of the river in underpants, wet, strong, bald, a leather thong tied around his waist. There was blood flowing from his head. Three men and a pack of mangy dogs milled about on the bank behind him. We greeted Patrick, asked what had happened. He took a few deep breaths, looked back at his friends, then told us his story. The men and their hunting dogs had chased a kudu down to the river.

The kudu swam across to the south bank. Patrick and his dog Ndiko gave chase. While Ndiko harassed the exhausted antelope, keeping it in deep water, Patrick wrestled his way onto its back. The kudu kicked him twice on the head. Patrick gripped the lethal horns and, angling them forwards, drowned the animal. He then tied the thong around the kudu's waist and started to swim it back across the river. The kudu's lungs filled with water and it started to sink – or, as Patrick put it, '*My* trailer *het 'n papwiel gekry* - my trailer got a puncture.' He nearly drowned, only managing to untie the thong once he and the kudu had settled on the riverbed. The kudu would soon surface, said Patrick. Would we search for a patch of beige the size and shape of a rugby ball? We criss-crossed the river in the half-light of dusk. 'If only we'd been five minutes earlier,' mused Chris. 'I'd have loved to paddle a kudu across the river.'

Patrick invited us to spend the night with him. We concealed our boats in a clump of reeds, gathered our food and camping gear, and followed the hunters to a small settlement near the river. This was Vredesvallei, Patrick told us, part of the Riemvasmaak communal lands. '*En daai doer's die Moloporivier*,' he said, pointing to a sandy watercourse, '*hy loop maar weinig* - and that over there's the Molopo River, it seldom flows.' Patrick's house was a square cement structure with several building projects in progress. The front door opened onto an excavated chamber with a raw cement step around its periphery. Patrick descended into the vault, switched on the television, pushed a

tape into the VCR. This was his living room. He motioned for us to sit down. Sound crashed into the room. A woman in a torn vest waged a gun-battle through the rear windscreen of a Chevy. Television has never seemed more ludicrous to me than it did then, the gunshots, the screeching tyres and crunching metal echoing off the cement walls of Patrick's chamber, the monstrous inappropriateness of American urban violence in rural Africa. I asked Patrick whether he knew anything of Riemvasmaak's history. '*As jy geskiedenis wil hê*,' he said, not taking his eyes from the screen, 'if it's history you want then you must talk to Norbit, our tourism officer. That's his white truck parked down the road.'

'Go and find him,' said Laurence. 'I'll get supper going.' I went outside, saw a tall man striding towards the white truck.

'Norbit!' I shouted.

He turned, considered this scruffy fellow in paddle gear, then smiled: 'That would be me.'

I told him that we were paddling the river, that Patrick had sent me to him to find out a little more about Riemvasmaak.

'Sure, let's sit in my truck.' He made me feel as if he had all the time in the world. 'What would you like to know?'

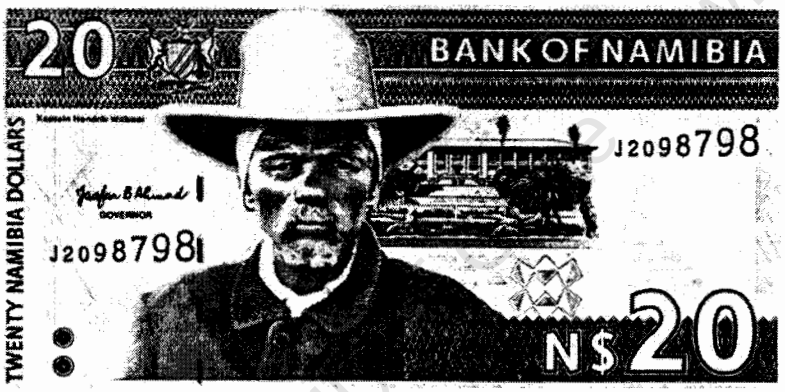
'Well... everything, I guess.'

Riemvasmaak is a 70 000 hectare tract of arid mountain land on the north bank of the Orange between Augrabies and the Namibian border. San peoples, said Norbit, once hunted and gathered here. During the second half of the nineteenth century Nama, Damara and Herero refugees crossed over into the Cape colony to escape protracted violence in Namibia. By 1870 many of them had settled in the Riemvasmaak area. German annexation, in 1885, and the oppression that followed, served only to swell their numbers. The name Riemvasmaak, which means thong-tightening, comes from the days when the Nama were flushing the San out of the area. '*Hulle het*

hierdie plek mak gemaak,' said Norbit, 'they tamed this place.' Three San were caught and tied up with thongs. While awaiting an audience with the Nama chief, they managed to untie themselves and escape. It seems to me that if this episode were truly the origin of the name, though, then *Riemlosmaak* - thong-loosening would be more appropriate. More likely the name derives from the practice of tightening the thongs on an oxwagon before entering mountainous terrain. 'It is necessary to *riem* the four wheels of the waggon,' writes A. A. Anderson in *Twenty-five Years in a Waggon* (1887), 'otherwise it would go crash down into the precipice below.'

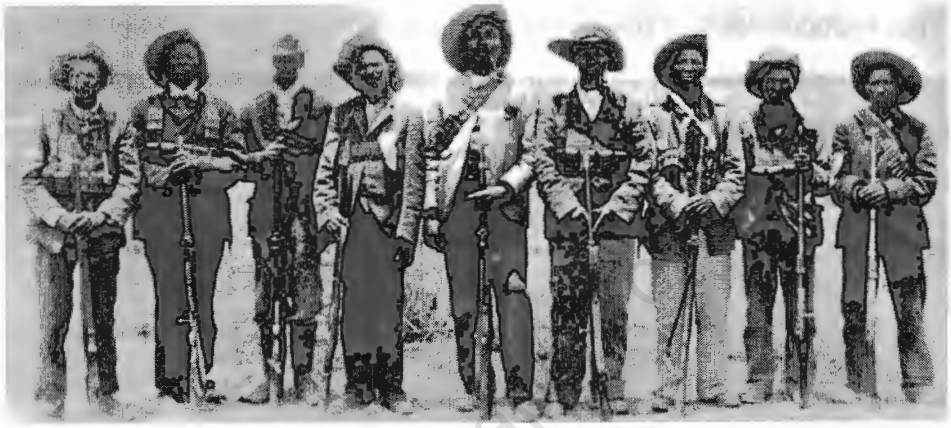
Riemvasmaak was again involved in cross-border activity during the 1904-7 Nama uprising, a desperate rearguard action against German brutality sparked by the Herero uprising to the north. Ever since Adolf Lüderitz landed at Angra Pequena in 1883 and signed a series of fraudulent treaties, the Germans had systematically expropriated cattle and land from the indigenous people. Hardly a year passed without armed conflict. In January 1904 the Herero rose as one. General Lothar von Trotha was brought in to crush the rebellion. Von Trotha drove the Herero from the Waterberg into the Omaheke desert, and sealed it off with a 250-kilometre cordon. He issued his notorious *Vernichtungsbefehl* - extermination order, whereby every Herero man, woman and child, whether found armed or unarmed, was to be shot. It was genocide, announced in advance. Out of an initial population of 80 000, only 16 000 Hereros survived the war. Once the Herero were all but annihilated, the Nama rose in the south. 'It was nothing short of a tragedy,' writes Horst Drechsler in *Let Us Die Fighting* (1966), 'that the Herero and Nama took up arms successively rather than simultaneously.' Samuel Maharero had tried to enlist Nama support at the time of the Herero uprising. In fact, the title of Drechsler's book comes from a letter Maharero wrote to Hendrik Witbooi: 'Let us die fighting rather than die as a result of maltreatment,

imprisonment or some other calamity.' Maharero entrusted this letter to Hermanus van Wyk, captain of the Rehoboth Basters, who promptly handed it over to the Germans. Van Wyk's action ensured that the Basters, come 1907, were the only local people still in possession of their land. The letter probably wouldn't have swayed Witbooi in any case. The eighty-year-old leader of the Witbooi Nama, celebrated on the Namibian twenty dollar note, had collaborated with the Germans ever since signing a peace with them ten years before. He sent a hundred men to fight on the German side against the Herero.



It was left to Jacob Marengo to bring the Nama uprising to a head. Norbit claims ancestry from Marengo: '*Ek is langbeen want Marengo was Herero* - I am long-legged because Marengo was Herero.' Norbit's family took refuge in Riemvasmaak after the conflict, changing their surname to Coetzee for fear of German reprisals. Marengo opened hostilities with eleven men, ambushing a German patrol. Disenfranchised Nama flocked to join him, and he soon had a hundred and fifty followers. Operating out of the Karasberg with his deputy Abraham Morris, Marengo proved a master at guerilla warfare, inflicting one defeat after another on the lumbering German columns. The other Nama tribes gradually joined the fray – the Witboois under Hendrik, the Franzmann community under Simon Kopper, the

Veldscoendragers and the Red Nation. A thousand-odd Nama, later reduced to a few hundred, armed with a handful of modern rifles and a pile of *rookgewere* - muzzle-loaders, sniped at the Germans from the maze of barren hills that is southern Namibia. They managed to tie up fifteen thousand imperial troops for over two years.



In March 1905 Marengo suffered a heavy defeat in the Karasberg and moved down to the Orange River, just west of Riemvasmaak. In October he inflicted the Germans' worst defeat of the war – forty-three enemy soldiers killed or wounded in an ambush, without a single man lost in return. A guerilla war, though, as the Boers had discovered five years before, is a contest in survival. Fresh German troops eventually began to overwhelm the exhausted Nama. Hendrik Witbooi was mortally wounded and his followers capitulated. As hostilities tailed off, Marengo hid his weapons in the bush and entered Riemvasmaak ahead of pursuing soldiers. He was arrested by the British and imprisoned in Tokai, Cape Town, for a year. On his release, in June 1907, Marengo refused the peace terms agreed to by other resistance leaders, and attempted to join forces with Kopper, who was still holding out in the Kalahari. A detachment of Cape Mounted Police intercepted Marengo in Gordonia and killed him. 'So the English,' Lenin would

later comment, 'were making common cause with the Germans in a colonial war.' A war in which, between the fighting and the subsequent concentration camps, half of the total Nama population died.

Riemvasmaak's Namibian refugees were joined, early in the twentieth century, by Xhosas and Basters from the colony. These people, many of whom had helped establish the Kakamas settlement, were considered squatters now that the Crown Lands of Bushmanland had been deproclaimed. They were cleared off newly-fenced white land and advised to go to Riemvasmaak, generally understood to be 'a kind of location for natives.' Exactly what kind of location was a question that would vex the authorities for the next fifty years. In 1922 a land commission appointed by the Smuts Government proposed Riemvasmaak as a possible coloured reserve. When the commission chose Mier in the Kalahari instead, Father Fages, a Catholic priest in Keimoes who held services in Riemvasmaak, pushed for the area to become a Native Reserve. This, he felt, would give his congregation more secure tenure over their land than the system of annually renewable grazing licences. The Secretary of Lands, however, wished to clear the area for white settlement. Enter the Secretary for Native Affairs: 'These coloured people have been driven from pillar to post in the past and the fact that they have for years been left undisturbed affords proof of the barrenness of the area... The country is known to me and is useless for white settlement.' The matter dragged on for ten years. Eventually, in 1934, Riemvasmaak was declared a temporary Native Reserve. Its school, however, remained coloured. The children were black when they were at home, it seems, and coloured when at school. In 1957 the nationalist government forced all Riemvasmaak residents to apply for Bantu identity books. Dawid Dawids was among those that refused, facing a fine of more than a month's wages. He had fought in the Cape Corps during World War II, he said, and wasn't going to become a Bantu after serving his country as a coloured.

Riemvasmaak's temporary reserve status paved the way for the forced removals of the Apartheid era. Black and mixed-race communities living outside permanent reserves were mopped up in a process officially known as 'Black Spot removals.' Riemvasmaak was identified as one such black spot. In 1973-4 approximately 1 500 Riemvasmakers were sorted by race and deported, some a thousand kilometres south-east to the Ciskei, the majority an unprecedented 1 300 kilometres north-west to Damaraland in northern Namibia. A memorandum issued by the Department of Bantu Administration set forth the procedures to be followed in a Black Spot removal. It stated that compensatory ground should be provided, if not in the same district, then at least in the same province. Most Riemvasmakers were moved not only out of the province, but out of the country. The best rains in living memory started to fall the day the government trucks arrived. As the veld greened about them, the people of Riemvasmaak took up sledgehammers and broke down their homes to salvage materials. Some held prayer meetings and vigils, prompting G.J. Jordaan, the Bantu Affairs Commissioner for Kakamas, to declare: '*Hotnot, ek sê al kom God te voet aangestap hier, sal julle uit* - even if God arrives here on foot, you'll be kicked out.' Jordaan is much hated to this day. Freddy du Pokoy, in his book *Riemvasmaak* (1995), imagines bumping into him: '*Ek sou 'n handgranaat by sy anus opforseer* - I would force a handgrenade up his anus... so that pieces of him are blown far and wide. Symbolic of how he forced the Riemvasmakers to wander the length and breadth of southern Africa.'

Some Riemvasmakers were classified coloured and were settled in townships between Upington and Augrabies. The vast majority, though, were deemed to be Xhosa or Damara. Many families were split up in the removals. The Riemvasmakers of Xhosa descent were loaded onto trains and taken to the Ciskei. This region, from which their ancestors had migrated a hundred and fifty years before,

was completely strange to them in terms of both language and culture. They spoke Afrikaans, and understood more Nama than they did Xhosa. The Riemvasmakers of Nama and Damara descent were re-located to Namibia, then a South African protectorate. A group of thirty families was settled too close to the Etosha Pan and lost much of their stock to marauding lions. They had no shelter or weapons and defended themselves only with fire. I looked out into the darkness beyond Norbit's truck, and caught glimpses of their terrifying new lives: days spent hunting and collecting wood, nights huddled around fires with their goats, dead brush pulled into *skerms* as meagre protection against the biting wind, and then the deep roar of lion, singed meat pulled from the coals, fires stoked, logs rearranged for brandishing. A knock at the window brought me back to the present. 'Grub's up,' said Chris, and disappeared back into the night.

Riemvasmaak was given to the South African Defence Force, who used it for missile testing, and the Augrabies Falls National Park, who planned to introduce black rhino. Nokie Andreas, said Norbit, was the hero of the SADF years. He trekked back to Riemvasmaak with his goats immediately after being deposited in the Ciskei, camped out in the hills, dodged bombs for twenty lonely years. Norbit, who seemed more concerned about my supper than his own, skipped twenty years. In 1994 the ANC-led government introduced legislation that allowed communities to claim restitution of land lost to racist policies. Freddy Bosman, brother of our host Patrick, approached Henk Smith of the Legal Resource Centre in Cape Town. '*Daar's net een Henk*,' said Norbit, 'there's only one Henk.' The Riemvasmakers beat off challenges from the Defence Force, National Parks and the Blouputs farmers across the river. In 1995 they won the right to return to their land.

'It's fantastic to be back,' said Norbit. 'We tend our stock, as we always did, and encourage tourists to drive their 4x4's around our

desert wilderness, visit our mineral springs.' He paused. 'We're not without our problems, though.' The Nama, it seems, used the authority of the Catholic Church to lord it over the Xhosas before the removals. The Xhosas became politicised during their absence from Riemvasmaak and now lord it over the Nama. Another issue facing the Nama is the future of their language. While they spoke and read Nama in exile in Namibia, there is no institutional support for the language in South Africa. A more immediate problem, said Norbit, relates to capital funding. The Irish Government helped finance several development projects, such as vineyards along the Orange and tourist chalets in the Molopo gorge. '*Maar die ier het sy handjies teruggetrek* - but the Irishman pulled his hands back.' Faced with apathy and mismanagement, the Irish withdrew their support. Several younger inhabitants now feel life was better in exile: '*Daar's g'n werk,*' they complain, '*g'n vooruitgang, 'n mens sit so gekluister* - there's no work, no progress, you're shackled.'

Laurence yelled that my food was getting cold. 'A final problem,' said Norbit, 'is the condition of the veld. The Defence Force left it in pristine condition, apart from the odd crater and unexploded mortar, that is. The grass was long and there was lots of game, springbok, klipbok, kudu and eland. But already the grass is over-grazed and most of the game has been poached. That Patrick you're staying with is part of the problem. He chases kudu down to the river and drowns them.' I was struck by the epic scale of the contest we had so nearly witnessed. I suppose, up until then, I hadn't really believed Patrick's story. 'I'm waiting to catch a poacher red-handed,' said Norbit. 'Patrick, or one of the army officers who once trained here, or those farmers from Blouputs who cross the river at night in their boats.'

As I walked back to Patrick's house, Norbit's litany of woes swirling about in my head, I couldn't help thinking that the way forward

for Riemvasmaak, as with every other settlement we had encountered, lay in pumping water from the Orange. '*As daar water genoeg beskikbaar is* - if there's water enough available,' writes Du Pokoy towards the end of his book,' gardens will be made.'

Chris and Laurence had already eaten and Patrick had gone to bed. Between mouthfuls I mentioned some of Riemvasmaak's problems. 'I wouldn't be in a hurry to say the veld's stuffed,' said Laurence. He pointed out that veld condition is usually climate-driven and that livestock seldom has an irreversible effect. The land settles into a grazed equilibrium and in good years bounces back. 'Besides,' said Laurence, 'it all depends on what sort of priority you give species composition and biodiversity in the first place.'

Later, lying on our sleeping mats on the floor of Patrick's cement vault, Laurence suddenly announced, 'Hey, it's my birthday today, my thirtieth birthday.' There was a short silence, then Chris's sleepy voice: 'Lol, if I had a little cupcake, I'd put a little candle in it for you.'

We were eating cereal down by the river when Patrick appeared. He had found the kudu, he said, pinned against a rock five hundred metres downstream.

'Will the meat still be fresh?' I asked.

Patrick smiled. 'Solid *soos 'n yskas* - solid like a fridge.'

Patrick Bosman is not the only hunter to have operated in this area. Half a day downstream of Augrabies is a spot Robert Gordon named *Camelopardalis Doodt* - Giraffe Death. It was here, in October 1779, that his party shot their first giraffe. One of Gordon's reasons for heading upriver was to search for new animals and plants – particularly the giraffe. This animal was a great curiosity in eighteenth century zoological circles and Gordon was keen to send a skeleton

and skin to his mentor, Professor Allamand at the University of Leiden. Though rock engravings suggest that the Egyptians may have domesticated the giraffe 3 000 years ago, and Julius Caesar returned from Africa with one 2 000 years ago, something of a mystique still surrounded the animal in eighteenth century Europe. Indeed, as late as the 1870s, Disraeli refused to believe the giraffe existed.

The first European sighting of giraffe in southern Africa occurred in 1663. There would be no further reported sightings south of the Great River until those of Wikar and Gordon in 1779. Several giraffe had however been shot north of the river in Great Namaqualand. The ivory hunter Jacobus Coetsé Jansz crossed the Orange in 1760. Here is an excerpt from his narrative: '*Werdende voorts in dit Land der groote Amacquas* - furthermore there is found in this land of the Great Amacquas a multitude of lions and rhinoceroses as also another animal still totally unknown here, which although not as bulky as the elephant, is considerably taller of body; the narrator supposes both because of this and the long neck, the humped back and long legs, that it is, if not a real camel, at least a kind of camel. In gait these animals are very slow and cumbrous so that the narrator, being on horseback on a certain occasion, and having given chase, caught up with two of them with little difficulty and shot them. Both were females, one of which was with a calf which the narrator took with him and kept alive for about 14 days on bran soaked in water.' The females must have been hanging back for the calf, as a giraffe at full gallop is capable of fifty kilometres an hour – hardly 'slow and cumbrous'. And the calf must have been very young. I assisted in the capture of two juvenile giraffe in Zambia. It proved a full day's work for ten men with a helicopter, a dart gun, two 4x4 vehicles and a custom-built trailer. Alternatively, Coetsé, like so many of the pioneers of the arid interior, was given to understatement.

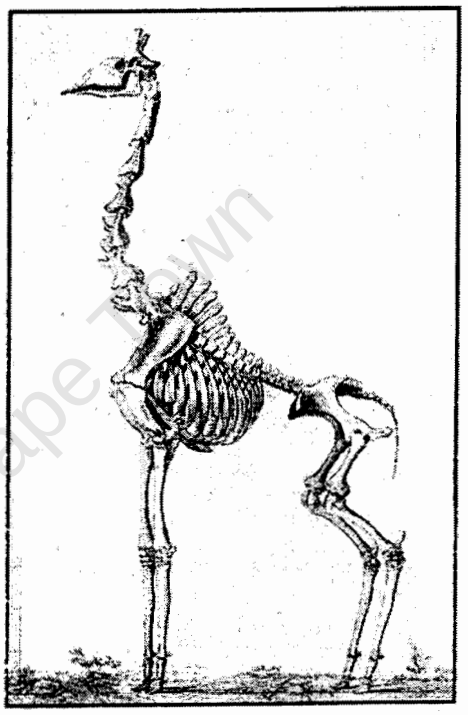
The following year Coetsé accompanied Hendrik Hop's official expedition to the unexplored territory north of the Orange. Near Warmbad in southern Namibia they shot a female giraffe and captured her young. True to the utilitarian spirit of the colonist, they noted that 'because of its extraordinary movements, it is unthinkable that this animal can be employed for any useful purpose.' Two weeks later they shot another giraffe. 'It was a male,' reports Hop's scribe, 'and when measured was found as follows:'

Length of head	1 foot 8 inches
Height from forehoof upwards to the shoulders	10 feet
From shoulder up to the head	7 feet
Length from shoulder to crupper	5 ft. 6 in.
From crupper to tail	1 foot 6 inches
Height from rear hoof up to crupper	8 feet 5 inches

Gordon, better versed in the ways of science than Hop, took seventy-eight measurements of the giraffe killed at Camelopardalis Doodt, all in Rhineland feet. He had the giraffe's skeleton cut up, wrapped in its skin and buried for safekeeping until their return. The next day Gordon saw more giraffe. He produced a narrative painting based on this encounter. It carries the inscription: 'View of the country at 28 degrees, 32 minutes, latitude and 3 degrees east longitude at the Cape of Good Hope; below the Great Waterfall Aukoerebis in the Orange or Garieb River in the country of the Einiquas. Here I saw the most beautiful and singular sight in all my journeys, seeing, all at one glance through a semi-circle: twelve giraffes, about fifty elephants, 5 rhinoceros, a flock of 20 ostriches, a herd of 13 kudu, and one great herd of zebra. Saw hippopotamus in the river below, swimming and playing together.' Of the seven species Gordon lists, only the occasional kudu and ostrich still roam the Augrabies area. Patrick Bosman should have lived two hundred years ago. I can see him

vaulting onto a zebra's back, garrotting the unfortunate creature at full gallop.

On his return to Camelopardalis Doodt, having travelled upstream as far as Knypgat se Berg, Gordon found that wild animals had dug up his skeleton. He decided to head north. Near Warmbad Klaas Afrikaner shot a large giraffe bull. When the skeleton reached Europe, it was hailed as both a personal triumph for Gordon and a great gain for Natural History. Professor Allamand praised Gordon's ability 'in the midst of the deserts of Africa to anatomize this great quadruped' and arranged for an article to appear in Buffon's celebrated *Histoire Naturelle*. The specimen was mounted and placed in the Prince of Orange's Cabinet of Natural Rarities.



There is an amusing sequel to these events. In Francois le Vaillant's *New Travels* (1796) he claimed to have shot a giraffe north of the Orange in 1783. Elsewhere this flambuoyant French gentleman traveller wrote: 'Many and various accounts have been published of the giraffe; but, notwithstanding all the elegant and scientific dissertations written on this subject, no just or precise idea hath been hitherto formed of its configuration, much less of its manners, its tastes, its character, and its organisation... the figures of this animal given in Buffon and Vosmar, are in general defective.' This slight on his entry in Buffon must have incensed Gordon, for slipped into his journal is a loose sheet of paper: 'Barend Vrije shot Vaillant's giraffe...

Vaillant took Barend Vry's horse for a giraffe and stalked it and nearly shot it dead, taking it for a giraffe. And Valliand has never seen a live giraffe and this giraffe was smaller than mine, so Pinar told me who saw both of them. Klaas Bastert also confirms that this is so and says that Vailliant himself never saw it being killed... Valliant stayed behind... Klaas expressed it a 'miserable cow'... not nearly as large as mine which he also helped to slaughter.' The normally meticulous Gordon is so indignant he manages four different spellings of Le Vaillant!

At some stage in the morning session the tangle of rock on the north bank became Namibia. We would be tracking a political boundary from here to the sea. It struck me that this river, for thousands of years a linear oasis that drew people together, now kept them apart. A few kilometres beyond the opulent lawns of Southern Farms, a big grape operation on the South African bank, we hooked left into a mountainous corridor – barren, unbushed, its delicate browns and oranges studded with outcrops of black.

A red peak dominated the far end of the valley. Here the river swung right and massed up behind a long zigzag weir. As we eased our boats through a break in the weir, a colony of leguaans scattered from the rock below. Little fish were slithering up the rock, trying to jump the weir. Barbel waited for them in the pool below. A mischievous spirit took possession of us, transformed us into the Fishermen of Red Rock Weir. Laurence armed himself with a paddle. He stalked the barbel, scooped up a fine specimen and dived on it. Man and fish wrestled their way around the slippery black rock for twenty seconds before the barbel made good its escape. Chris, armed with a billie can, stood by the weir and caught little fish as they leapt. I fashioned a net from shadecloth and intercepted the fish as they slid back down the rock.



We endured for two hours into the teeth of a westerly, then stopped for a late lunch at a mineral spring we had seen marked on our map. We soaked in two circular pools at the foot of a dark rocky slope, smoked dope, relaxed, read our books, decided to stay for the night. A deep fatigue crept over us as our shoulders softened in the mineral heat, our muscles unbunched. The westerly whipped up a dust-storm through which the sun set in radiant orange – the warmest, most luminous light I've ever seen. The surreal set in. Here we were on the banks of a little-travelled, desert-flanked river in remote Africa,

hundreds of kilometres from any settlement deserving of the name town, indulging in one of the rituals of ancient civilisation. So trippy had the day been, I don't think it would have surprised us had a triumvirate of toga-ed bathers appeared. In fact, I feel sure we'd have been able to address them in classical tongue.

An early mineral dip set us in store for another day, another forty clicks. The mountains that had hemmed us in since Augrabies opened out into a broad, shallow valley. We passed an old rusted waterwheel, the flotsam of somebody's dream. Ten kilometres short of Onseepkans Chris and I capsized the double to cool off and fluffed our roll. We decided to stop for lunch on a nearby sandbar. An hour to go. Or so we thought. After lunch the river branched out into a delta of reed and riverine bush. We were forced to lay our paddles on the decks of our kayaks, pull ourselves down overgrown channels. For three reeded-blistered-napalm-hothouse-cursing hours it seemed as if we were in that other Nam – Vietnam, that is, as opposed to Namibia. We eventually docked beside a large flat boulder downstream of Onseepkans bridge, one of South Africa's more remote border posts. We concealed the boats, packed our sleeping gear and some food into fertilizer bags, and set off in search of the beds kindly offered us by Andrew Kellett of Gravity River Tours. It was six in the evening, and still murderously hot. It had been 45°C that day, we discovered, 48°C the previous week. Onseepkans occupies a hard, hot piece of Africa. The locals claim that Goodhouse, 150 kilometeres downstream and reportedly the hottest place in the country, has nothing on their little settlement.

For hundreds of kilometres the Orange River marks the northern boundary of Bushmanland, those immense and silent wastes once inhabited by the San. It is difficult to appreciate the river's life-

giving role without experiencing the aridity and isolation of these vast grassy plains, their autumnal moods. '*Dis oop wêreld daardie*,' a farmer near Boegoeberg had told us, '*daar's niks in sig nie* - it's open country, there's nothing in sight.' Fifty kilometres south of Onseepkans is Pofadder, a *platteland* town in the heart of Bushmanland that occupies something of a mythological place in the national consciousness. Its name, resonant with the perils that faced the pioneers to the north, is not derived, at least not directly, from the deadly snake. Klaas Pofadder was elected chief of his Korana clan following the death of his brother Cupido in 1874. He settled for a time at a spring on the site of the present town. In 1875 the Reverend Christiaan Schröder established a mission there and named it after the incumbent chief. Storekeepers from Namies, thirty kilometres to the south-west, migrated to Pofadder in the 1890s and it gradually became a white settlement.

Namies is one of the places where nomadic *trekboers* congregated for *nagmaal* - communion. It is also the setting for William Charles Scully's novel *Between Sun and Sand* (1898): 'The spot known as Namies is marked by a few stony, irregular kopjes which lie like a small archipelago in the ocean-like waste of Bushmanland.' Scully, born into landed gentry in Tipperary, Ireland, arrived in Cape Town in 1867. Following unsuccessful attempts at prospecting for diamonds in Kimberley, where he shared a tent with Cecil John Rhodes, and gold in Pilgrim's Rest, Scully entered the Cape civil service. In 1892 he was appointed Special Magistrate for the Northern Border. 'Lush greenery and rich valleys may stir the emotions,' he discovered, 'but the desert arouses the intellect.' Scully wrote poems, short stories and novels based on his experiences. *Between Sun and Sand* is the tale of a Jewish storekeeper's love for a *trekboer* girl, and the murder of an old Bushman over alluvial diamonds. The novel is shot through with observations on

Bushmanland. When Scully writes of the fiery champagne air and the vaults of azure that pierce the infinite, of the dew-washed desert nights and the pulsing stars domed overhead, of being close enough to the heart of solitude to hear its beats, he appears, like many prophets and mystics before him, to consider the desert a place of clarity and vision, a place where one might arrive at essentials. He takes the *trekboers* to task for failing to see this: 'The desert life, which has filled the Arab with poetry and a sense of the higher mysteries, has sapped the last remnant of idealism from the Trek-Boer's nature, and left him without an aspiration or a dream.' Scully seems unduly harsh on this migrant people battling to make a living in marginal terrain. Deneys Reitz, for one, was more sympathetic. He encountered *trekboers* in Bushmanland while *en route* to the Orange River during the Anglo-Boer War: 'We moved north through country thinly occupied by Nomad Boers, who spend their lives going from one well to another with their flocks, like the old people in the Bible. They are a primitive patriarchal folk, knowing little of the outside world, but of a brave and sturdy stock.' The *trekboers* roamed the plains of Bushmanland from one waterhole to the next, reading from their great Bibles, multiplying their flocks and herds, shooting game. Francois le Vaillant likened them to 'the Hottentots, whose customs they have adopted, and from whom they in no respects differ but in their complexion and features.' Certainly, their lifestyle owed much to the Khoi. They adopted the *matjieshuis*, a temporary igloo-like dwelling made of reed mats spread over willow wands, and learnt to vary their diet of milk and meat with edible roots and bulbs. They would settle for a few months by good pastures, move on when the veld thinned out. During the short fierce rainy seasons they trekked to standing water, shared it with flamingos and sandgrouse. If the rains failed to materialise they would retreat to the banks of the Orange to see out the drought. Their nomadic existence was punctuated, at least once every quarter, by a trip to the

nearest church for *nagmaal*. This was an occasion for social intercourse and for courting, for calling on doctors and visiting shops and *smouse*, the itinerant salesmen who trawled Bushmanland in donkey carts. The *trekboers* bought material and shoes, Callard and Bowser's Butterscotch, *gember konfijt* - ginger preserve. They paid for their purchases with feathers and skins. At the time of the *trekbokken* - springbok migrations, they paid with biltong, that staple of frontier life.

The migrations were a great phenomenon of Bushmanland and the Karoo. The springbok, obeying some strange impulse, would begin to move *en masse*. Here is Scully in *Between Sun and Sand*: 'There is something inexpressibly sad about the fate of these hapless creatures. Beautiful as anything that breathes, destructive as locusts, they are preyed upon by man and brute... the hyena and the jackal hang and batten on the skirts of their helpless host; the vultures wheel above its rear and tear the eyes out of the less vigorous which lag behind. Sportsmen and pot-hunter, Boer, half-breed and Bushman, beast of the burrow and bird of the air, slaughter their myriads; but still the mighty mass assembles every year and surges across the Desert... there is no sport involved in killing them, for they press blindly on... their only impulse is to surge forward in a flood-tide of destruction and beauty.' Scully describes a party of *trekboers* setting off from Namies to intercept the *trekbokken*. They draw their wagons into the path of the drove and halt, a mile or two apart. Soon the muffled thunder of small, sharp hooves is upon them. The tide of springbok and other antelope borne along with them – eland, wildebeest, quagga – parts and flows around each wagon. The settlers and their Baster and Khoi servants fire blindly, volley after volley, killing or wounding three or four springbok with each shot. Carcasses are periodically carted back to Namies, where the women and children cut the meat into strips for biltong and peg the skins out on the ground. For three days and nights this massacre continues.

In an introductory note Scully is at pains to point out that his account of the *trekbokken* is no exaggeration. He was obliged, he says, in 1892, to issue one hundred stand of Government arms to *trekboers* for the purpose of driving back a mass of antelope which threatened to raze the vegetation level with the ground. (The Germans, to the north, used machine guns.) Travellers' accounts of springbok migrations suggest Scully certainly wasn't exaggerating. The big game hunter Roualeyn Gordon Cumming, for instance, saw 'a dense living mass of springboks' move by 'in one unbroken compact phalanx.' The boundless plains, he reports, and even the hillsides which stretched away on every side of him were thickly covered. His host, an old *trekboer* named Swiegers, told him: 'You this morning behold only one flat covered with springboks, but I give you my word that I have ridden a long day's journey over a succession of flats covered with them, as far as I could see, as thick as sheep standing in a fold.' The trek of 1892 was, according to Scully, the last great springbok migration. From east to west they vanished across Bushmanland, gone forever like the bison from the North American

plains. The following year Scully arranged for a game reserve of 170 000 morgen to be proclaimed in Bushmanland, the first formal conservation area in southern Africa. His ban on hunting, however, proved impossible to enforce. Whenever a police sergeant rode out to patrol the reserve, farmers living on the borders would light smoke fires as a warning. Columns of smoke marched across Bushmanland, and the *trekboers* were seldom caught. By 1919, when the reserve was deproclaimed and the Crown lands auctioned off, there was little game left.

That evening, sitting on the porch of Gravity's house in Onseepkans, watching Chris turn meat on the coals, I remembered that it had fallen to Scully to record the demise of more than just the *trekbokken*. By the 1890s, he writes in *Lodges in the Wilderness* (1915), 'within the wide bounds of that tract to which the Bushman gave his name, there existed but two individuals of his race – an old, withered man, and a bent and ancient crone. These wraiths, who subsisted on roots, reptiles and insects, still haunted the mountains near Dabienoras, and levied a kind of toll on the very occasional traveller. This took the form of a trifling contribution of tobacco and sugar.' The San of Bushmanland shared the fate of the migrating springbok: they were hunted into extinction by the colonists. A drop of fat flared on the coals and as the light played over Chris's face, a memory flickered inside me. Somewhere in my researches, in one of the histories of South Africa, I think, Theal or De Kiewiet or Marquard, I had read of a speech by a prominent settler in which he argued that just as the land had been cleared of springbok to make way for sheep, so it should be cleared of natives to make way for good farming. This sentiment saw the name of action in Bushmanland. Indeed, Namies, the scene of Scully's springbok slaughter, played host to at least one San slaughter. A commando 'surrounded the place during the night, spying the Bushman's fires. At daybreak the firing commenced, and it

lasted until the sun was up a little way. The commando party loaded and fired, and reloaded many times before they had finished. A great many people were killed that day. The men were absent. Only a few children escaped, and were distributed amongst the people comprising the commando. The women threw up their arms, crying for mercy, but no mercy was shown them. Great sin was perpetrated that day.'
These are the words of a servant who witnessed the attack whilst tending to his master's horses. They are recorded in Louis Anthing's 1863 report on atrocities committed against the San. It is worth taking a step back, though, to explore the chain of events that culminated in Anthing, Resident Magistrate for Namaqualand, being sent to Bushmanland to investigate the destruction of the northern San.

Conflict between the late stone age peoples of the Cape and European colonists dates back to the pioneering voyage of Bartolomeu Dias in 1488. While moored at Mossel Bay, one of his men shot and killed a herder with a crossbow. Violence flared up again in 1510 when Francesco de Almeida, the Viceroy of Portuguese India, visited Table Bay. His men seized one of the local Khoi to strengthen their trading position and a fight ensued. De Almeida and over fifty of his men were killed. The Europeans henceforth considered the southern tip of Africa a land 'full of Tigers, and people that are savage and killers of all strangers.' It was little visited over the next hundred and fifty years. A party of Englishman found themselves 'belegred by Canibals and Cowes,' and stayed close to their tents. In 1652 Jan van Riebeeck founded a refreshment station for the *Vereeningde Oost-Indische Compagnie*. The indigenous pastoralists were not so much savage killers, he reported, as a '*botte, plompe ende luye stinckende natie* - a dull, stupid, lazy, stinking nation.' Van Riebeeck wasted no time, however, entering into trade agreements with them. Cattle were bartered for iron, copper, tobacco, brandy and beads.

Soon the Khoi were losing their cattle to force and fraudulent exchange. As the refreshment station gradually changed into a colony, two wars were fought over land. By 1700 the majority of the western Cape Khoi were impoverished, dependent on colonial farmers for their livelihood. Historian Nigel Penn notes that the Khoi, in providing both livestock and the labour to care for it, occupy a position for which there is hardly any parallel in history. When the smallpox epidemic of 1713 raged through their number, Khoi society, already in decline, was all but annihilated. 'The very names of the best-known tribes,' reports Theal, 'were blotted out by the fell disease.'

Around this time the frontier zone expanded rapidly. The limits of agrarian settlement had been reached, and it was left to a wave of pastoralist *trekboers* to break new ground. In the spirit of America's 'Go west, young man!,' landless sons and eager new arrivals pressed north and east to herd and hunt, barter and raid. No sooner had they entered new terrain than reports began to filter back of '*Bosjeman*' attacks. Given that there was little to distinguish cattleless Khoi from wandering San, these early attackers were probably disenfranchised Khoi looking to regain their cattle wealth. Further *trekboer* expansion, though, sparked genuine San resistance. This was fiercest in mountainous regions and in areas where retreat would have resulted in a loss of resources. The choices facing the hunter-gatherers were those faced by any primitive people coming into contact with an aggressive, and technologically more advanced, society: resistance, incorporation, serfdom, or retreat. The San, aware perhaps that peace posed a greater threat to their way of life than war, opted to fight.

The Company's response was to endorse the commando, an institution that would cast a dark shadow over South African history. The early to mid eighteenth century was punctuated by an ad-hoc pattern of raid and counter-raid. The San, particularly in the east, remained defiant. Robert Gordon relates the following encounter:

'These so called Bushmen or Chinese have a famous chief called Koerikei, or bullet-escaper. Veldwagmeester Van der Merwen told me that, after an action which he had commanded, this Koerikei, standing on a cliff out of range, shouted out to him: "Why are you on my land? You have taken all the places where the eland and other game live. Why did you not stay where the sun goes down, where you first came from?"' The General Commando of 1774 was genocide, pure and simple. Governor van Plettenberg and his council had determined to wipe out ('*uijt te roeijen*') the San. Three commandos, each comprising several hundred burghers and their Khoi and Baster servants, launched a systematic attack along a five hundred mile front. There was no precedent for the slaughter that followed. According to an informal scoresheet kept by the civil commissioner of Graaff-Reinet, a document that is almost certainly incomplete, 503 San were killed in the commando drive of 1774, another 2 480 in the years leading up to the arrival of the British at the Cape in 1795. The enthusiasm with which the colonists pursued the so-called Bushman Wars had much to do with their need for labour. While adults were generally killed, thousands of San children were captured and pressed into service on farms.

The British severely curtailed commando activity, but by then the *trekboers* had already succeeded in clearing the San from the firearm frontier, which is to say, from all land of pastoral value. A proclamation of 1798 announced that the San had been reduced to 'misery and want which at length compels them to the cruel necessity, of having recourse to robbing and various other irregularities in order to support life.' Reading those words, I realised that little has changed so far as crime in South Africa is concerned. In fact, the more colonial history I read, the more I come to realise that today's complaints about crime are due not so much to escalation, as to an increasingly

democratic impact. This has always been a criminal country; the difference today is that whites are victims too.

By the turn of the century the only independent hunter bands south of the Orange were those that had retreated to, or long inhabited, the inhospitable wastes of Bushmanland. The British were unwilling to incur expenses on the northern border and so made little attempt to restrict northward expansion. Baster communities, in the 1830s, were the first outsiders to arrive in Bushmanland; the *trekboers* were hard on their heels. Both groups had been squeezed out of the colony by the inexorable spread of commercial wool farming. There was a seemingly limitless demand for the woollen goods of Manchester, the city from which industrialisation spread out across the globe. With Britain's own clip declining, she turned to the colonies for wool. The previously worthless land to the north was perfectly suited to sheep, provided the farms were big enough. With the abolition of slavery in 1834 (slaves were to remain 'apprenticed' for a further four years though), the plantation owners at the Cape turned to wool, which required less labour. Following emancipation in 1838, they financed huge new tracts of land with slave compensation money. Wine and grain exports dropped by over 50% between 1828 and 1848. Over the same period, wool exports increased by a factor of sixty. It is one of the ironies of coloured history that emancipation, so good for the slaves, should prove so disastrous for the San.

By the 1840s the wool barons had reached the southern edge of Bushmanland. They used it for summer grazing – depleting the veld, driving the game away. Their hunting parties decimated the game that was left. Wagon-loads of biltong were carted from Bushmanland. The slaughter of springbok, wildebeest, hartebeest, quagga, and especially eland threatened the future of San society. With their means of subsistence disappearing before their eyes and nowhere to turn – they were hemmed in by colonists to the south and

the east, by the Nama and Basters of the Kamiesberg to the west, by Korana and Griqua to the north – the San of Bushmanland were forced, for their very survival, to plunder cattle and sheep. They faced severe reprisals from the *trekboers*, who were used to handling their own emergencies. When the primitive machinery of frontier justice intervened, it was in the form of field-cornets, themselves *trekboers*.

Sir Harry Smith extended of the borders of the colony to the Orange River in 1847. Bushmanland became Crown Land, which is to say, communal grazing for white and Baster farmers. The San were not considered. New arrivals surged north, further increasing the pressure on the land. By the 1850s the situation had reached a pitch of violence and desperation. San numbers dwindled as Boer and Baster commandos did their best to convert Bushmanland into Bushman-free land. In 1861 news of this systematic annihilation reached Louis Anthing, Resident Magistrate for Namqualand. He obtained permission from the Attorney-General to investigate and, in February 1862, embarked on a self-styled 'Special Mission.' A trader named Nicholson told Anthing that there had been many San living in western Bushmanland when he had arrived there twelve years before, now there were none. Conversations with farmers and the few surviving San uncovered descriptions of crimes perpetrated both by and against the San. The crimes committed by the San, with the exception of one or two retaliatory murders, consisted of stock theft or such trifles as offering too few ostrich feathers in exchange for a ram. The Basters and the Boers, on the other hand, systematically hunted down and killed entire San communities, as in the attack at Namies. Sometimes they shot wandering San 'for the fun of the thing.' Anthing reported to the Colonial Office that 'the darkest deeds and the foulest injustice were perpetuated, that can disgrace humanity anywhere and this under the proclaimed and recognised protection of the flag of England.' Outbursts such as this didn't win him any friends. When

Anthing submitted his report the following year, the Cape Argus of 27 March 1863 labelled it 'nothing more or less than a mare's nest, not a single proof having been found of the truth of the iniquities practised by the Boers.' The government gradually withdrew its support for Anthing's mission, and his quest to improve the lot of the San became a lonely one. He was eventually transferred to Cradock, where his pay was withheld and he was forced to resign. Anthing's suggestions were shelved and nothing more was done for the doomed San.

Tgaams, a flat-topped mountain west of Namies, was the last fastness of the Bushmanland San. Remnants of independent bands, not yet reduced to the wraiths and stragglers of Scully's day, gathered at this mountain stronghold in the 1870s. They raided far and wide. The commandos sent out to capture them failed to find any trace of either the San or the cattle they had stolen.

One day an enterprising farmer followed a gully up the north face of Tgaams. He found, to his surprise, that the mountain was hollow. San camps dotted the valley and there were several herds of cattle. He

returned with a large commando, which laid siege to Tgaams and wiped out the last vestige of San resistance. Legend has it that the commando chased the fleeing San all the way to Loeriesfontein, killing every last one of them, with the exception of one small child whom a Baster women hid under a zinc bath. The San disappeared as a cultural entity from all territory south of the Orange. It is more than faintly ironic that the motto on the national coat of arms, *!ke e:/xarra //ke*, should mean, in the tongue-twisting clicks and glottals of the now vanished /Xam people of Bushmanland, 'diverse people unite.'

I first heard about Tgaams on the random ride I took at the time of my thirtieth birthday. Known today as Gamsberg, this grey-brown mesa rises like an iceberg from the grass-yellow plains of Bushmanland. Anyone who has driven the N14 between Springbok and Pofadder, one of the last great free-your-mind stretches of road, will have encountered Gamsberg near the surprising oasis of Aggeneys. Superimposed on the landscape like so many yards of roll-on lawn, this rich little mining town pumps its water from the Orange River forty kilometres away. I have already mentioned the envious farmer who first told me of the trees and emerald lawns of Aggeneys. '*Water is lewe* - water is life,' said Nak Reichert. He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger: '*As ek maar net so 'n straaltjie Oranjerivierwater gehad het* - if only I had a stream of Orange River water this size, things would look very different around here.' A geologist working for Anglo-American Corporation gave me a lift up Gamsberg. He mentioned that his company was planning to move the mountain so as to get at one of the richest deposits of zinc on earth. Never mind the game the San lived off, nor indeed the little hunters themselves, it would appear that even their last fastness isn't safe from the remorseless jaws of history. We ascended the south-western slope of Gamsberg. Limitless plains stretched away to the horizon. A

series of distant hills looked like... well, like nothing so much as a small archipelago in the ocean-like wastes of Bushmanland.

From the summit the road wound down into the kidney-shaped basin that has been eroded from the centre of Gamsberg. The depression was littered with quiver trees and San artifacts. In addition to the usual flints and ostrich shell beads, we found fragments of china and pieces of blue and green glass – the remains of cups and medicine bottles the San would have bartered from Namies *smouse*. We climbed the opposite edge of the Gamsberg plateau. Away to our north the mountains of the Orange River rose from the plains. 'For sheer, uncompromising aridity,' writes Scully, 'for stark grotesque naked horror, these mountains stand probably unsurpassed on the face of the globe.'

Dawn light slowly filled the room. Only the corners were still dark. I stood up in my sleeping bag, hopped over to the unglassed window. I looked out over Onseepkans – the palms in Gravity's garden, the silent steaming water in the canal, the rows of green vines end on to the rich yellow reeds flanking the river. And beyond, in Namibia, jagged heaps of granite and basalt emerging from the sand, dark, serrated, sharp as spines. A storekeeper opened early for us. By seven o'clock we had stocked up on grains, cans, frozen bread. Chris played quartermaster. It took him an hour to plan the meals, to decide which foods should be buried deepest, which should be easy of access. It took us another hour to pack the boats. Two silent hours, full of apprehension. What if we missed the chicken run river-right and got sucked towards the undercuts and siphons of the upper Onseepkans Gorge? Felix had given us – what was it, three weeks ago now? – an horrific account of his experiences in the gorge, pinned underwater against a rock face in churning grade six water. Grade six – that means a good chance of

dying if you come out of your boat. Felix hung in, manipulated his paddle in the current, and eventually slipped free to maintain his record of not baling from a kayak since 1984. What if we found the chicken run but capsized near the end of it and were swept over the Ritchie Falls? Or what if we managed to portage Ritchie, only to come unstuck in the big rapids of the lower gorge: 42-man hole, Big Bunny, Dolly Parton? It calmed Laurence and me somewhat to see that Chris's greatest concern appeared to be for Vikram, which is to say the novel *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, that great 1 500-page brick of ballast that accompanied us all the way down the Orange. Chris had placed Vikram in four successive Ziploc airtight bags, one inside the other, and was now securing it in a water-tight bag lovingly constructed from packing tape with duct tape reinforcements.

The first few kilometres were slow. In our desperate effort to stick river-right, we repeatedly grounded ourselves in minor channels. We eventually entered a fast-flowing stream along the north bank and bounced down several playful rapids, the boats heavy, unresponsive. Seven or eight kilometres into the chicken run, Laurence scouted a rapid that curled away to the left. It ended in a one-metre pour-over. This could only be Little Falls, the last rapid before the somewhat more serious Ritchie Falls. Lol reported that the water beyond Little Falls was smooth. Even if we capsized, we would be able to swim to the bank. Which was a luxury not afforded to Mickey du Toit and Louw van Riet when they had paddled through the Onseepkans gorge almost a month earlier, on Christmas day. The river had been considerably higher then and flowed strongly from the base of Little Falls to the point where Ritchie Falls cascades down fifteen metres of rugged rock into the gorge below. Mickey and Louw, ill-informed as usual, thought the chicken run bypassed Ritchie Falls. Which is a dangerous misconception to be under, particularly for two young men who don't seem to believe in scouting. Mickey capsized at Little Falls

and clung to his boat as the current swept him downstream. He is extremely fortunate that a group of Namibians had chosen to spend their Christmas day at this remote spot. They leapt up and waved their arms, yelling: '*Valle!* - Falls!' Louw half-heard them and, sensing trouble, paddled after his friend: '*Mickey! Los jou boot!* - leave your boat!' Mickey grabbed a thornbush with three or four metres to spare. He next saw his boat the following April. The Namibians, according to Mickey's written account of their trip, let them know '*dat die skroewe in ons koppe nie heeltemal vas is nie* - that the screws in our heads aren't fully fastened.' They lent him towels to sleep under and gave him a lift to the Noordoewer road the following day. He then hitched through the desert landscape of southern Namibia, barefoot with a paddle: '*Dis al besitting wat ek oor gehad het* - it was the only possession I still had.' He managed to reach Provenance, Felix Unite's camp on the river. Here he waited for Louw, who, like his father forty years before him, paddled the 220 kilometre stretch from Ritchie Falls to Noordoewer solo. They completed their trip in a borrowed Indian canoe. Though it's likely Mickey would have been pinned to a rock and drowned if he'd accompanied his boat over Richie Falls, he claims he had an even closer scrape with death the previous evening. Pressing to get to the mineral spring, they approached Red Rock Weir after dark. Mickey was swept over the weir backwards. He baled from his boat, which got trapped below the weir and was recycled for ten minutes. He swam three large rapids without a lifejacket in the dark before he managed to get to the bank. The incident, he says, left him '*nogal gerattel* - quite rattled.' Mickey and Louw, exhausted and dejected, crawled into their tent and opened a can of baked beans with vienna sausages. Their thoughts drifted to their families, gathered for dinner on Christmas Eve.

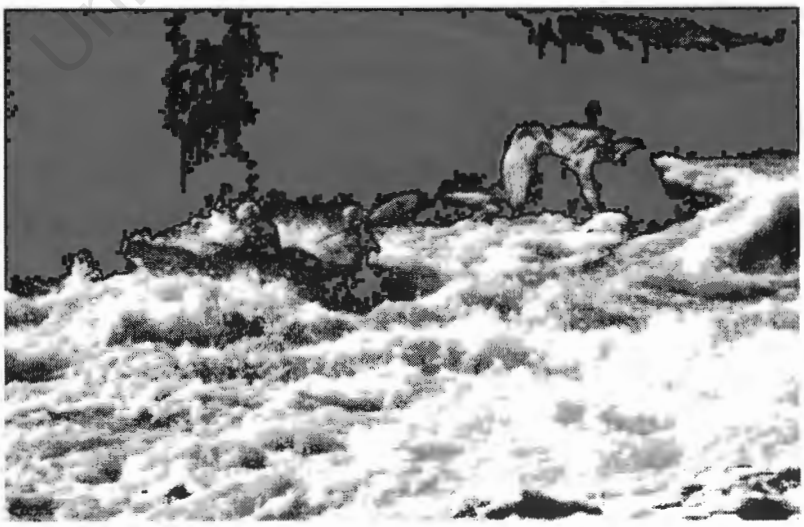
We shot Little Falls and pulled over to the bank. A short walk brought us to the edge of the Onseepkans Gorge, a steep-sided

channel hewn from grey rock, some thirty metres wide and, perhaps, as many deep. Something of that sacred energy of Augrabies emanated from the smooth granite as it sloped down to a scree of boulders piled at the water's edge. It seemed incongruous that a river should be moving through this half-gnarled, half-polished lunar world, that it should track this band of granite to that point in the distance where it merged with jagged brown hills and the purple mountains beyond.

We floated our fully laden boats across the headwaters of the falls, lugged them through the heat and dazzle of bare rock to the edge of the gorge, and then roped them down the smooth incline. With the boats safely moored, we cooled off in the spray below the falls, treated our palates to the new tastes of bully beef and beetroot.

Back on the water, we drifted through 42-man hole, a minor feature in low water, though by all accounts a monster when the river runs high. We put down our paddles and sat back to absorb the

majesty of our granite surrounds. The sheer presence, the imperishability and yet perishability of these great grey slabs. The way the light played off the water and then attached itself to the stone. The cathartic blue of the sky. Are these not the moments we live for, I remember thinking, these moments when rock and water and sky are shot through with some greater significance? I was lulled from my reverie by the roar of big water. We pulled over to the left bank and clambered downstream over smooth dark basalt to view the rapid. Big Bunny lives up to its name in low water. The river was a mess of rocks and holes and standing waves. We each had a pee, our usual response to big water, then considered the options. Far river-right seemed safest. We plotted a line that skirted a rock and then slipped between two holes before feeding us into the teeth of a wave chain two hundred metres long. It appeared that if we angled left we should be able to ease our way out of it. Laurence and Chris shot the perfect line in the double. Chris was entirely submerged by the first few waves – dunkings, he jokes, that interrupted Laurence's running commentary from the back seat: 'Harder, harder! Pu... [silence]... that's it, Chris! Now... [silence]... on the left! Pull le...[more blissful silence]... ell done! We're through.'



I was next. The first standing wave towered over me, engulfed me as I crashed into it. The second came at an angle and slapped me over. I took an age to position my paddle in the churning water, then rolled up only to be slapped down again. I panicked and popped my splash deck, surfaced in the trough between two massive waves. Laurence threw a perfect safety line. I forgot to let go of my boat, though, and nearly ripped him from the rocks. Clutching my boat in one hand, my paddle in the other, I embarked on one of the longest, bounciest and most exhilarating swims I've ever taken.

The gorge narrowed, squeezing the river between two large boulders. Fortunately Dolly Parton underperforms in low water, and we shot the turbulent gap without incident. We were, by now, paddling in deep shade. We needed to find a campsite. As always, the river provided. The gorge opened out into a valley, burnt orange by the late afternoon sun. We beached on baked clay next to a level grassy dorm. In an upwelling of foolishness and joy, we decorated the branches of a dead tree with our paddle gear. 'There's treasure everywhere,' announced Chris, dragging a dead *prosopis* tree into camp. We made a great bonfire, seeing it as a victory of sorts against this invasive alien that grows unchecked along the banks of the Orange. Shortly before sunset a fisherman named Johannes Jacobs walked into

camp. He was tiny, timid, resourceful – a cross between the Camel man and a sparrow. Johannes put down his catapult, removed his knapsack, sat down by the fire. He considered our paddle-tree for a while, then observed that the Nama have a similar custom. The *n//a* pole is a branch of a tree that is buried in the ground, its pruned offshoots pointing up. It is used to hang up kitchen utensils in a temporary camp. Johannes joined us for dinner. We gave him far too much food. He stowed most of it for later. He did, however, ask for six sugars in his tea, explaining with a chuckle: '*Die lewe is mos bitter genoeg* - life is bitter enough.' He clasped his hands around his tea, told us why he liked it so sweet. His heart had been broken at nineteen. He was a bachelor, still lived in the house he had been born in, a reed hut near Onseepkans Mission. His mother had died the previous year, aged 79. He had worked on farms, mines, laid pipes. Now he walked the banks of the Orange. '*Saans beweeg die vis nader. Ek slaap maar weinig* - the fish move closer at night. I seldom sleep.'

VI

We threaded through the crisp reds and browns of morning mountains. A large house overlooking the river at Coboop stood as a beacon to that other world, the world of linen and bathrooms and microwave ovens. An hour later we approached the serrated peaks of the Pellaberge. Behind them lies the small town of Pella. There is no place in southern Africa quite like it. Pella is centred on a mustard-walled cathedral, its outbuildings festooned with bougainvillea. Date palms and thin desert air give the settlement an oasis feel, North Africa or the Middle East. Indeed, in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935) T.E. Lawrence speaks of 'a tangled country of acacia and feathery tamarisk' – a description of Arabia that's spot-on for Pella and its hinterland.

The London Missionary Society established a mission at Pella in 1812. They endured fifty years of barrenness, then abandoned it when a minister and his family were murdered by marauding San. A French Roman Catholic order, the Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, reopened the mission in the 1870s. The heat and hardship proved too much for their pioneering missionary. In 1882, Father Jean-Marie Simon was sent out from France. Simon and four colleagues sailed via Cape Town to Port Nolloth. They had arranged to take the 'Special,' a train run by the Cape Copper Company, from

Port Nolloth to O'Kiep. When they docked, there was no train in sight, only mules milling about in the African sands. 'I cannot describe our amazement,' writes Simon in *Bishop for the Hottentots* (1959), 'when we saw that the mules were firmly harnessed to a few little carriages. Yes, this was the train! These rolling boxes were our dining and sleeping cars, these mules were our engines.' Simon, who would take the Special many times, reports that when the trip was made in summer one saw nothing but sand and dry, scraggly bushes, while in winter 'you will see a sight unequalled even in the most fertile and prosperous lands of Europe. It is an unending flower bed of bright and varied colours. The colours of the flowers change with the altitude and the climate in which they grow. On the heights they appear dark red and velvety; on the plains where the cold is less intense their colours are lighter, turning to the yellows or even becoming perfectly white when the sun shines continuously on their corollas.' Simon shifts his attention from the spring annuals of Namaqualand to the culinary habits of his fellow passengers: 'At noon each passenger opened a little package of sandwiches that he had prepared in advance according to his taste and appetite. The English washed it all down with a few cups of tea that the employees of the line brought them, and then they were ready to enjoy the rest of the day. We Frenchmen preferred beer.'

They reached the foot of the Kamiesberg, 'a mountain almost 3,050 feet high that we would have to negotiate with the lone help of our mules. They would sweat and be almost out of breath, but they would get to the top.' The ascent lasted two hours. 'As we approached the summit of this mountain we were reminded of the gorges of Switzerland or the Tyrol. There were drops of over 2,000 feet. The road had been hewn out of the rock and there was just enough room for one man between the 'Special' and the rocks. When we looked over the precipices we felt dizzy.'

Simon toiled for fifty years to turn Pella into the oasis it is today. He returned only once to France – to be consecrated Vicar Apostolic of the Orange River. He was known ever after as Bishop for the Hottentots. Simon was assisted, for all but his first three years, by Father Leo Wolf. In 1888 they conceived of a cathedral in the wilds. They had no knowledge of architecture or building, and leaned heavily on the *Encyclopedie des Arts et Metiers.* When a plumbline was sent from France they couldn't identify it. The inhabitants of Pella collected 400 wagonloads of stone to lay foundations, 350 bags of slaked lime for mortar. They baked 200 000 bricks on the banks of the Orange, ten kilometers away. Father Wolf collected willow wood on the islands, swam two wagonloads ashore each day. The metal for the spiral staircases was hammered and twisted over dung fires. Father Wolf, reports Simon, negotiated the copings on the cathedral roof as if he were walking across his own bedroom. They completed the Pella cathedral, with its flashes of Roman and Gothic, its flying buttresses, its vaults and columns, in 1895.

The Reverend John Campbell christened Pella in 1813. Having renamed the Griquas at Klaarwater, he headed west for the

LMS settlements in Namaqualand. Water was scarce and nauseous. One of his Khoi servants was killed by a San arrow. Campbell encountered the Reverend Albrecht and his Nama congregation huddled on the south bank of the Great River at Cammas Fonteyn. They had fled from Warmbad, north of the river, to escape the ravages of Jager Afrikaner. Campbell renamed the settlement after ancient Pella, a refuge for Christians when the Romans invaded Jerusalem. In his biography *The Life of Africaner, A Namaqua Chief of South Africa* (*c.*1830), Campbell writes: 'For a long time after these Namacquas had fled to Pella, across the Orange river, from the dread of Africaner, the least rising of dust or sand at a distance frightened them very much, and they were sure it was Africaner coming after them.' This is not the first time we have encountered Jager Afrikaner. It is time to tell his story, a story which is closely connected to the Orange River.

Jager was born in the Tulbagh valley in the early 1770s. His father Klaas had married into the dwindling Kaixa-kaiu tribe who roamed the Witzenberg and Winterhoek mountains with their stock. Jager was not, as the title of Campbell's biography claims, of Nama origin. The name Afrikaner suggests he was of predominantly western Cape Khoi stock, with slave and/or colonist forebears. Eric Walker, in his *History of Southern Africa* (1928), talks of 'half-castes or Afrikanders, a growing class, who were household slaves and often the confidants of their masters and mistresses.' One of Jager's ancestors, it seems, had chosen to pursue an independent existence rather than settle for second-class citizenship. Campbell is on firmer ground when he labels Jager not by ethnicity but by occupation, as he did in the appendix to an earlier work: 'History of Africander, a Plundering Chief on the Great River.'

When colonists entered the Tulbagh valley and took over Kaixa-kaiu land, Klaas and his sons moved north to the Hantam. They entered the service of rough-and-ready colonist named Petrus

Pienaar. Klaas Afrikaner and Petrus Pienaar had both accompanied Robert Gordon on his travels up the Great River in 1779. Pienaar had shot the expedition's first giraffe, Klaas the second. Pienaar sent the Afrikaners out on semi-official expeditions against the San. In one 1792 raid they killed 113 San near the Sak River in Bushmanland. The government was impressed, and supplied Pienaar with guns and ammunition for his charges. Around this time Klaas and his sons moved to Sandfontein, Pienaar's *legplaats* - loan farm on the Orange, twenty-five kilometres west of Pella. They left the colony to avoid conscription into the Corps Pandoeren. 'All the Hottentots and Bastards fit for commando,' complained a *veldwachtmeester* - rural militia officer, 'are going away to Namaqua country to evade serving on commandos.' Pienaar, like most frontiersmen, was engaged in cattle-raiding. He used the government arms to fuel plundering missions deep into the interior, unleashing the Afrikaners on peaceful bands of Nama, Einiqua and Korana. Judging by the accounts of missionaries and pioneer travellers, Pienaar took to sending the Afrikaners out on long missions with little prospect of bounty so as to gain access to their wives and daughters. The Afrikaners confronted Pienaar. While the accounts of this altercation vary, they all have the same ending: Jager's brother Titus raised his musket and bequeathed to Pienaar six feet of Hantam earth.

Alea iacta est - the die was cast. Murdering 113 San was one thing, killing a white man in self-defence was quite another. Jager and his family rode north to the Great River, then turned and headed east. They entrenched himself on Perde-eiland and the other islands above Augrabies. The Afrikaners were not so much fugitives from colonial injustice, like the Koks and Barends upstream, as outlaws. Their best career opportunities, given their commando experience, lay in banditry and terror, and they applied themselves to these pursuits with zeal. They sallied forth from the islands in good old border tradition,

plundering anyone in reach – be they Nama, Einiqua, Korana, San, Baster, Oorlam, or colonist. A three-hundred-kilometre radius of terror spread out across the northern frontier. The government placed a price of one thousand rixdollars on Jager's head, and several burgher commandos rode north to apprehend him. None managed to penetrate his island stronghold. Today still, a dense shield of riverine vegetation fortifies both the islands and the banks of the river. Besides, I can't imagine that a young farmer or Baster servant, roped in to confront the deadly Afrikaner Oorlam gang, would have acquitted his task with much enthusiasm.

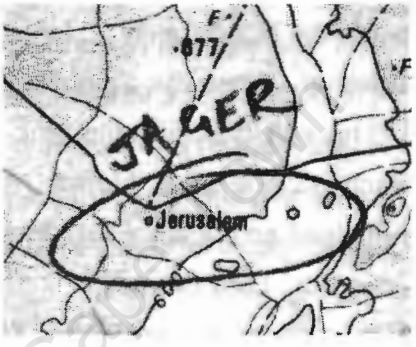
The Afrikaners' arrival on the banks of the Great River ushered in a period of violence and instability, and severely disrupted the indigenous economies. With their guns and horses, and their taste for European clothing and language, the Afrikaners were at the forefront of the oorlamisation – in today's terms, westernisation – of the Orange River frontier zone. Jager's following grew rapidly as disaffected Basters and Khoi, inspired by Pienaar's murder, robbed their masters and fled north. As his reputation spread in the colony, all manner of fugitives – runaway slaves, escaped prisoners, army deserters, men who had lost their land – trekked north to swell his ranks. He also attracted destitute Khoisan, many of them victims of his plundering raids. Soon Jager was able to challenge the larger Baster and Oorlam settlements, particularly those led by Cornelius Kok and Barend Barends. Cornelius's 45 000 sheep became a target, but it was against Barend that he waged something of a vendetta. Jager discovered that the colonists, unable to tame him themselves, had offered the Barends family twenty guns, fifty pounds of powder and two hundred weight of lead as reward for his capture. Running battles ensued along the banks of the Gariep in 1798. Stow, in *The Native Races of South Africa* (1905), describes how adversaries in this part of the country would shoot at one another from behind rocks and trees for

days on end: '...the design of the assailants was to make as much noise as possible, and then amid the din and terror inspired by it upon the minds of those who were as yet somewhat unaccustomed to firearms, to get possession of their cattle with as little risk to themselves as possible; for their intention was evidently to capture and to feast, and not to fight and die.' Jager's commando-hardened troops changed all that. They rode headlong into the defensive positions of the enemy and flushed them out into the open. These new tactics quickly won them the upper hand, and the founders-to-be of the Griqua state were forced east. Cornelius established a kraal at Bitterdagga and Barend settled even further upstream at Hardcastle, near present-day Prieska. Jager then conducted an offensive against the colonists for sponsoring Barend. He raided deep into the Hantam, killing a burgher and carrying off over 3 000 sheep and 500 head of cattle. A new price was placed on his head, this time in pounds.

By 1802, when the Truter-Somerville expedition arrived at Bitterdagga, the Afrikaners had established themselves as masters of the middle Orange. William Somerville reports that they held 'the whole extent of the Garipe for 500 miles in terror.' Truter sent out a party of Basters, Xhosas and colonists against Jager and Stephanos, the false prophet who had recently joined him. This well-armed force managed to capture three hundred head of cattle and two muskets. Jager, who was running low on powder and had been reduced to firing copper bullets, realised that the balance of power along the river was shifting in favour of those who attracted official recognition. He left his island refuge and headed north-west to Blyderverwacht in Great Namaqualand. Here the Lion of the North initiated a fresh reign of terror. A Nama chief later explained to the missionary Robert Moffat (in the presence of the now converted Jager) that he had spent a night in the desert with his people, among the beasts of prey, 'rather than gaze on the eyes of this lion or hear his roar.'

After a few years at Blyderverwacht Jager began to tire of the outlaw life, a life that had, in some senses, been forced upon him by the commando experience of his youth and the showdown with Petrus Pienaar. With the missionary William Anderson now well established at Klaarwater, it is not difficult to imagine the aging Jager's thoughts turning wistfully to the sedentary and respectable lives of the Koks and Barends. In 1806 the brothers Albrecht crossed the Great River and founded a mission station at Warmbad, one hundred kilometres west of Jager's headquarters at Blyderverwacht. Soon after their arrival, Jager rode into Warmbad. The Nama and Oorlams scattered, but Jager let it be known he was there in friendship. He decided to send his children for schooling and religious instruction, and even, on occasion, attended himself. Peace descended on Great Namaqualand. Then, in 1810, Jager arranged for a certain Hans Dreyer from the Kamiesberg to travel to Cape Town for him. Dreyer was to take three teams of oxen and swop two of them for a wagon. A local farmer seized the oxen in lieu of Dreyer's debts. Jager paid Dreyer a visit, and found him unrepentant. A scuffle ensued and one of Jager's men shot and killed Dreyer. This murder set into motion a chain of events that culminated in open hostility between the Afrikaners and the Nama. The people of Warmbad lived in perpetual fear of Jager's attack. The waiting unnerved them, and after some weeks Albrecht led an exodus south to Cammas Fonteyn on the Great River. When Jager eventually attacked Warmbad, he found the town deserted. He ordered his men to fan out and loot the place. One of them walked over a newly dug grave only to hear music rise from it. The soil was removed to uncover Mrs Albrecht's piano-forte. It had travelled across ocean and desert from London, and had been buried for safekeeping. The Afrikaners salvaged the steel wire and ivory, then set fire to Warmbad and rode out of town.

Campbell decided that taming the lion would be a feather in his cap. He sent Jager a conciliatory letter. Jager had seen how Christianity had given the Koks and Barends access to powder and lead. He knew something of the Christian faith thanks to Stephanos and requested that Campbell send a missionary, hymn books and Bibles. The missionary Ebner was dispatched to Blyderverwacht. He baptised Jager in 1815, renaming him Christian and his settlement Jerusalem – a name that still appears on maps of southern Namibia. In 1818 the young Robert Moffat was sent to join him. Moffat found Ebner a victim to Titus Afrikaner's abuse and a virtual prisoner in his own home. It was only due to Moffat's skilful diplomacy that his predecessor secured safe passage from Jerusalem. Moffat's first months weren't easy. He was lonely after Ebner's departure. And it didn't help that the colonists he had stayed with on his journey north had told him that Jager would use his skull for a drinking cup. He provides a touching image of himself playing his mother's favourite hymn on the violin, alone among the granite rocks that surrounded the kraal. In time Moffat gained Jager's confidence and the two would sit up all night talking of 'creation, providence, redemption and the glories of the heavenly word.' Jager learnt to read and write and studied the New Testament at every opportunity.



Moffat decided to visit Cape Town in 1819. He invited Jager and his son Jonker to join him. Jager was horrified: 'I had thought you loved me, and do you advise me to go to the government, to be hung up as a spectacle of public justice? Don't you know that I'm an outlaw and that 1000 rixdollars have been offered for this poor head?' But Moffat remained optimistic, and after three days of consultation with

his people, Jager agreed to accompany him. The people of Pella, whom Jager had chased out of Warmbad ten years earlier, held a banquet in his honour. Disguised in one of Moffat's shirts, a duffel coat and a hat, Jager posed as a servant for the crossing of the colony. Several farmers congratulated Moffat and his entourage for managing to evade the blood-thirsty Afrikaner. When the old outlaw and his son, the outlaw-to-be, reached Cape Town, Moffat organised an audience with the Governor. Lord Charles Somerset was so impressed with Jager that he gave him a wagon equal in value to the now revoked price on his head. Jager Afrikaner's conversion was one of the London Missionary Society's most visible successes. Campbell claims in his biography that 'the first and last part of the life of the Apostle Paul were not more opposite to each other, than that of Africaner's.' He reports at length, in question and answer format, on Jager's impressive showing at Cape Town and Paarl prayer meetings:

> Q: Were God to punish you for your sins, would he be good and just?
>
> Jager: O yes! I have sinned in thought, in word, and in deed. O yes! I am the great Namacqualand sinner; and God would be just and good, were he to punish me eternally for my sins.

Campbell, it seems, was using these fervent exchanges to chide lukewarm English Christianity. The rhythm of the speech is

unnatural, and Jager's knowledge of the scriptures, at times, too good to be true.

On his deathbed, in 1823, Jager Afrikaner repented of his 'former life... stained with blood.' Jonker succeeded him, and immediately set about staining his own life with blood. He blazed a trail of conquest up to Windhoek, unleashing a whole new cycle of violence and disruption. A peaceful branch of the family stayed on at Blyderverwacht, but by the 1860s had become, in the estimation of Maximillian Jackson, 'a marauding and worthless tribe.' In 1897 the Namibian Afrikaners rebelled against new *rinderpest* regulations. The Germans responsed with characteristic brutality. The rebels were driven over the Orange, extradited, and, in the words of Governor Leutwein, 'shot to the last man.' Jager's once-powerful family ceased to exist.

Sitting in the Kultur Koffiekroeg, Pella's reed-walled coffee shop, I remembered that I had scribbled a footnote from Martin Legassick's Griqua thesis onto our map for that day. There it was, a blunt pencil scrawl across the Blydeverwacht Plateau in southern Namibia: 'Though the Afrikaner family was brutal in its raiding tactics, their constructive contribution should not be neglected: free from any government pressures, Jager and Jonker Afrikaner built up frontier states, incorporating persons from many different cultures, on a scale not achieved by any other Oorlam or Griqua leader.' My thoughts drifted back to our conversation with Jan Baartman under the willow trees short of the Vaal confluence, of his pronouncement that the coloured people have '*g'n geskiedenis, g'n kultuur* - no history, no culture.' How wrong he was. Here was a respected historian talking of proto-coloured states along the Orange two hundred years ago, of their positive contribution to frontier society, their acceptance of people from many different cultures.

Beyond Pella the Orange flows through the Spelonk- and Skimmelberge. Here the thinnest of green lines separates the river from barren brown rock. We shared a hot lunch with cows and flies, gave up trying to nap, paddled on to the date palms of Klein Pella. Unlike the patchy trees planted by Bishop Simon, this plantation loomed like a jungle, row upon row of healthy Medjool palms. They were planted by Gert Niemöller, who started farming karakul sheep and lucerne at Klein Pella in the 1950s. One of his major challenges was to level the dunes near the river. Niemöller's labourers used a primitive grader consisting of a wooden plank harnessed to a team of donkeys. They worked long, dusty hours for three shillings a day. '*God, hulle't wurms geëet* - god, they ate worms.'

Niemöller lost the bulk of his labour force in the 1960s when over a hundred Tswanas working at Klein Pella were forcibly removed from what had become a 'coloured area.' He managed to hide one Tswana worker. It was his job to milk the cows – something the coloured workers wouldn't do on Sundays. For years Niemöller battled for permission to import date palms. When the authorities finally relented, he travelled to the Sonoran, cactus country, for Medjool offshoots. The nursery he used in Yuma, Arizona, was one of the few suppliers worldwide not to have been bought out by the Israelis. Today there are more date palms at Klein Pella than anywhere else south of the Sahara. We left Niemöller's oasis as day began to fade out to night, paddled through pockets of unsettled air, now cool, now

warm, the legacy of an extremely hot day. Fish jumped for insects, kingfishers dived for fish. A rusty light seemed to emanate from the river itself.

I was standing thigh-deep in river, scraping out a pot, when the sun broke over the reeds. It lit the crests of the ripples as they fanned out from me, fracturing the crisp red reflection of the mountains opposite. My mind was far from this idyll, though. Early in the day's paddle, somewhere between Kheisberg and Hartebeesberg, we would encounter the Kum Kum Falls. In the weeks leading up to our trip I had spoken to several people who had paddled the river, marked the features they mentioned on 1:250 000 topo-cadastral maps. The only obstacle I had been unable to pinpoint was Kum Kum. I visited the Directorate of Surveys and Mapping, pored over the contours on small scale maps, searched aerial photographs for the tell-tale white of rough water. In the end I had to settle for a ten kilometre range. Scrawled on our Kum Kum map are notes like 'JG: piece your way through river-right' and 'Felix: stay right.' In fact, all but one of my informants cautioned us to stick river-right and avoid the falls. This seemed more sensible than the lone dissenting voice: 'river-left, portage Kum Kum.'

After Kheisberg the Orange branches into myriad channels. We headed right at each opportunity. The stream soon dwindled and we were forced to backtrack. In a shallow channel the double's rudder snapped off. Laurence snapped at Chris. We pulled over to the bank for repairs, then clambered up the mountainside to scout. A breathtaking delta spread out below us, green and lush, hemmed in by bony brown peaks. We couldn't see the stream at the far bank, though, for greenery and distance.

Two dead-ends later we pulled over for tea. A shepherd appeared. Isak Botes had worked with the *dadelbome* - date palms at Klein Pella for ten years. Now he tended his stock. Isak sat down with his tea. He was gaunt, ghost-like, with a scrappy salt-and-pepper beard. '*Ek woon op die noordoewer met die grootmense*,' he said, 'I live on the north bank with my parents. They draw their pensions here in Namibia. Me, I must row across the river each month to get mine.' We asked Isak about the Kum Kum Falls. He led us up the slope, turned, pointed to a white rondavel on the opposite bank. A prospector had once lived there, he said. The falls were '*so 'n entjie stroomaf* - a short way downstream.'

No sooner had we eased back into strong water, safe in the knowledge that we'd avoided Kum Kum, than the stream hooked left and whisked us across to the south bank. We decided to scout. Two minutes later we were standing on a rock ledge watching our stream crash into the body of the Orange. A series of gnarly rapids, all pouring over the same jagged ridge, stretched away upstream to a not-very-scary-looking two-metre waterfall. The entire delta, we realised,

converged below the falls. For all our anxiety and slow progress, we ended up portaging a rapid that must be considered part of the greater Kum Kum system. Future Orange adventurers, two things: here is a GPS reading taken three hundred metres below the falls – 28°51.147' S, 18°49.976' E; and I recommend Paul Lee's no-nonsense approach – 'river-left, portage Kum Kum.'

Lightning flashed to the north. The skies, we now noticed, had clouded over during our exercise in waterfall avoidance. Big drops plopped around us. Soon we were paddling in a downpour. Twenty minutes later the sun broke through the clouds, its rich clear light electrifying the banks. A rainbow arc-ed across the still-dark skies ahead of us. The clean smell of ozone mingled with the mustiness of cattle and reeds. We tapped on to Witbank, a farming community on the south bank. Some forgotten hand had noted 'shop' on our map. A few kilometres short of the settlement the river branched right of Krapohleiland, leaving only a narrow channel along the south bank. Just how desperate were we, respectively, for a coke, a packet of cigarettes, and a story? I forget how the votes fell, but we took the stream less paddled and for half an hour battled through dense riverine bush. We came to a clearing and Chris clambered up the bank. There were buildings, he said, a kilometre downstream. Ten minutes later we surprised a group of donkeys at the water's edge. I followed them up the bank and emerged on a broad barren plain protected by an arc of hills. Chris's cluster of buildings was now about three kilometres downstream. Nicotine starvation was playing havoc with his sense of perspective. We pressed on, scraping over stones, portaging sharp rocky sills, finally beaching at the ruins of an old pump station. We picked our way through a mess of untended cotton, then made for the whitewashed houses, luminous in the late afternoon light. Witbank's shop proved to be a reed-walled hut with a corrugated roof. Our needs were few, though – coke they had, and cigarettes. The locals, I

noticed, were hesitant of us wild-looking men in tight clothes. I considered Laurence and Chris, tried to see them as the Witbankers might be seeing them. There was a glazed edge to their smiles, a hard feral quality. It was as if we'd lost some of our humanity, as if some of our softness had been baked out by the heat.

I walked around the corner of the shop and almost stumbled over an old man sitting in the sun. He and his friends quickly switched from Nama to Afrikaans and rattled on among themselves. I asked the shopkeeper why this was. White farmers in the area didn't like it, she said, when people spoke Nama. They thought they were plotting against them or making plans to steal. So this is how languages die, I thought. I had read an article on the internet claiming that ninety percent of the world's six thousand surviving languages will disappear in the next hundred years. That's one language every week, one whole system for making sense of the human experience, one step closer to an homogenised world of big macs and imacs and coca-cola for sale at every dusty little frontier store. Only five thousand people still speak Nama, or *Khoekhoegowap* - the people's language. The majority of them live in Namibia. South Africa's Nama live along those lonely reaches of the Orange that mark the border with Namibia: Riemvasmaak, Onseepkans, Pella, Witbank, Goodhouse, and the Richtersveld. There is no institutional support for Nama in South Africa. Schools actively discourage the language and farmers and other employers feel threatened by it. Nama names are continually eroded. *Gu-daos* has been corrupted into Goodhouse, *O'okiep* collapsed into Okiep. Many of the Nama no longer pass on South Africa's oldest living language. They know their children will carry it as a burden. Historian Noël Mostert breaks with the European tradition of likening Khoisan languages to a babble, turkey-talk, a hungry man swallowing oysters. He describes *Khoekhoegowap* words as among the most beautiful in the world: 'The cadences of the wild, of water and

earth, rock and grass, roll onomatopoeically along the tongue... The sand and dry heat and empty distance of the semi-arid lands where the Khoikhoi originated are embedded in them.' Nama words – inscribed in the names of mountains, rivers and towns around the country – are like charms. Look at a map of the northern Cape, find the mountains called Abbasas and Haramoeb, the twin copper towns of Okiep and Nababeep, the Gannakouriep River east of Tswaiis, and the Oudannisiep. Whisper these names, invoke their reality.

We were about to return to our boats when Frans du Plessis walked up, introduced himself. He was wearing blue overalls, a beige foreign legion-style cap, a welcoming smile. Frans told us that the channel we had been negotiating dried up downstream of Witbank. He would give us a ride, he said, back to the *Grootrivier* - Great River. As we loaded our boats onto Frans's silver and pink *bakkie*, he started to tell us the story of Witbank, this community of sixty-odd families spread over three farms on the banks of the Orange. Khoisan and Damara peoples, he said, had long been living there, cultivating along the river, grazing their sheep and goats inland. They were little disturbed by the various mineral consortia who bought and sold the land in the early

1900s. In the 1930s the government took over. They issued grazing licenses, and settled demobilised coloured soldiers. The Witbank community grew more established, cleared arable land, built an irrigation canal. Then, in 1957, the apartheid government cleared the people off the land, replaced them with white tenant farmers. Some become labourers on land that had long been their own. It's hard, though, to farm a place that offers little but sun and stone. When the Orange came down in flood in 1974 and destroyed the canal, many white farmers left the area. The Witbankers trickled back to the fragile tenure of their old lives.

'We now own two of our farms,' said Frans, 'and rent the third.' They received the farm Witbank from the ANC government in 1996, in accordance with the restitution clause in land reform legislation. They then bought the adjacent farm Hartebeesrivier with a grant from the Irish government. This money also paid for an agricultural service centre, several tractors and implements. The people of Witbank planted lucerne and cotton, and the banks of the Orange bloomed. The Minister for Land Affairs, Derek Hanekom, announced: 'If Witbank, with all its disadvantages, with so much history against it, and in a place so remote, can succeed, it gives us hope for the country.' He spoke too soon. Crooks took control and syphoned off the Irish millions. They embezzled the R807 000 brought in by the first cotton crop. In 1997 an auditor described the books of the Witbank development committee as the best he had ever seen. Two years later, the committee was sunk in a web of corruption and there were no books at all.

As we bounced down to the river in Frans's truck, he proposed a solution to Witbank's woes: individual tenure. Communal ownership of equipment and land wasn't working, he said. The outlying farmers were wrecking the Irish tractors. They treated them as personal transport, bouncing into town in top gear. After the first cotton crop,

no-one was willing to clear the old bushes; there was no incentive to do the work, as profits are divided equally among the community. Frans's idea is not a new one. 'Give a man secure possession of a bleak rock,' wrote Arthur Young in his *Travels* (1787), 'and he will turn it into a garden; give him nine years lease of a garden, and he will turn it into a desert.' Frans canvassed the Witbank families, found that three-quarters of them want to divide the land along the river into privately owned plots. Others resist the idea. '*Die wat te lui is om te werk wil gemeenskaps hê*,' says Frans, 'those too lazy to work want communal ownership.' The land away from the river, also communal, is grazed by privately owned herds. It is overstocked, depleted.

Conflict between self-interest and the common good always reminds me of the prisoner's dilemma. There is a side street of mathematics called game theory. Game theory looks at those situations in which one's decision-making depends on other people's actions. The best known game is the prisoner's dilemma. Two prisoners on trial face the choice of cooperating with one other – that is, remaining silent – or betraying one other. If they cooperate, each goes to jail for a year on a minor charge. If they betray one another, each serves seven years. If one cooperates and the other betrays, the former gets ten years and the traitor walks free. This table presents the permutations facing each prisoner:

	...and the other cooperates	...and the other betrays
Cooperate	1 year	10 years
Betray	Free	7 years

A quick look at the table shows that no matter what the other does, each prisoner is better off betraying. Two rational prisoners, so argues game theory, will thus betray one another. They will serve fourteen years between them, the worst cumulative outcome. If they each

cooperate, they serve two years between them – but, of course, in choosing to cooperate each prisoner risks the possibility of a ten year sentence if the other betrays. The prisoner's dilemma appears to present a bleak outlook for cooperation. The logically best action – in a moral vaccuum – is to betray. This is only the case, however, if the prisoner's dilemma is played once. When the game is played repeatedly, virtue prevails. If, for instance, the prison sentences given above were in days, and not years, and two regular offenders repeatedly had to choose between cooperation and betrayal, they would soon settle on the best collective outcome, which is to say mutual cooperation and one day each in prison.

A prisoner's dilemma played by many people is sometimes called a 'tragedy of the commons.' This phrase was coined by the biologist Garret Hardin in an influential 1968 paper. Hardin considers overgrazing on medieval commons: 'The rational herdsman concludes that the only sensible course for him to pursue is to add another animal to his herd. And another; and another... But this is the conclusion reached by each and every rational herdsman sharing a commons. Therein lies the tragedy. Ruin is the destination towards which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interests in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons.' Hardin argues that an open access resource will always be overexploited. It pays a herder to increase his stock, even beyond the carrying capacity of the land, because if he doesn't, then somebody else will. But just as we saw that repeated playing of the prisoner's dilemma results in cooperation rather than the expected selfishness, so medieval commons were not disasterous free-for-alls, but rather sensibly and sustainably managed resources. Commoners are not fools. They see the tragedy coming and take steps to avert it. Spanish peasant farmers, well aware of the watchful eyes of their neighbours, take no more than their share of water from the canal. If shame alone doesn't discourage transgressors,

punishment will. Turkana herdsmen in Kenya are beaten with sticks if they allow their goats to eat too many acacia pods. Communities evolve ethical rules that punish betrayal and make cooperation more attractive.

It is not communal farming *per se* that leads to overgrazing in places like Witbank; the root cause is nearly always poverty. In 1984 the House of Representatives, the coloured wing of P.W. Botha's tricameral parliament, subdivided communal land in several Namaqualand rural reserves into privately-owned 'economic units.' They hoped to encourage entrepreneurship and modern farming techniques. The scheme was a disaster. Those without access to land were impoverished, and the units themselves were shown to be uneconomic. Four farmers successfully contested the issue in the Supreme Court, and the commons were restored. Communal land tenure provides many more people with a livelihood, and allows for a full suite of utilisation – firewood, construction materials, medicinal plants, *veldkos* - foraged food.

So why has the Witbank community not evolved ethical rules to deal with overgrazing? A combination, I guess, of poverty and social disintegration. Goats often provide a family's only income, and poverty doesn't allow for a long-term view. Decades of social engineering don't make for a community in which trust and cooperation can easily take root.

It was getting dark by the time Frans deposited us on the banks of the *Grootrivier* and drove back to his family, who were waiting for him to connect up the television set to the *bakkie*'s battery. We huddled around the campfire to protect it from a strong wind that had picked up, cooked spaghetti, ate straight from the pot. I filled in my diary by the light of a *boesmanskers* - Bushman's candle, a succulent with a waxy, slow-burning bark, while Chris and Laurence washed themselves in the dark press of the big-currented river.

We awoke to a curiously soundless day. Last night's wind had died down. The only sign of it now was a fine layer of dust that had been lifted from the barren plains and deposited on our boats and sleeping bags, on our arms and our faces. Witbank's expanse of baked earth, punctuated by a handful of scraggly bushes, stretched away to the south, into the stillness, to the foot of the Dabenoris Mountains and their jagged satellite, Le Vaillant's Peak. I don't know when this peak was named, but it must have been after 1963. For this was the year the Library of Parliament acquired a hitherto unknown set of 165 watercolours, each drawn either by or for the French ornithologist and traveller François le Vaillant. One of the drawings – 'Camp of the Giraffe on the border of the Orange River' – proves that Le Vaillant reached the Great River. It has been identified as the view east from Ramansdrif, an historic ford we would pass later in the day. The perspective is a little confusing, for while the majority of the mountains in the drawing are north of the river, Le Vaillant's Peak, the sharp peak on the right, is five kilometres south of the river. In the foreground is a giraffe skin mounted on poles.

It was long doubted whether Le Vaillant had, as he claimed, reached the Orange. Although he has been vindicated, the doubts levelled by his contemporaries, as well as by later scholars, were well-founded. His two volumes of *Travels into the Interior Parts of Africa by way of the Cape of Good Hope in the Years 1781, 1782, 1783, 1784, 1785* (1790) and his three volumes of *New Travels* (1796) contain many inaccuracies, exaggerations, distortions and lies. Even his ornithological masterpiece, the magnificently produced *Histoire Naturelle des Oiseaux d'Afrique* (1796-1808), has been shown to contain composite birds, created from the heads, bodies, wings and tails of different species, and invented birds with fictitious behavioural observations to match.

François le Vaillant has been described as 'one of the most ludicrous, engaging, and colourful young men' ever to visit southern Africa. His books are highly entertaining. Le Vaillant presents himself as a dandy who wore fine clothes in the veld. His outfit of knee breeches, white stockings, a frilly shirt and a hat plumed with ostrich feathers must have delighted the frontier farmers. One of his most treasured possessions was a dressing case of powders, pomades and perfumes. For all his dandyish ways, though, Le Vaillant was tough and resourceful: 'I was completely armed. In the side pockets of my breeches I carried a pair of double-barrelled pistols; I had another pair of the same kind at my girdle, my double-barrelled fusee was slung at the horn of my saddle; and a large sabre hung by my side, and a poinard or dagger from the button-hole of my vest: I could therefore fire ten times almost in a moment. This arsenal incommoded me considerably at first, but I never quitted it.'

His most loyal travelling companion was a Cape baboon named Kees. Kees sat beside him on the wagon, slept with him in his tent, diverted and amused him, so says Le Vaillant, sometimes exasperated him, but never failed to expel his melancholy. The

baboon was the taster of new foods in the veld, and proved more vigilant than any of his watch-dogs. An obvious mutual affection existed between man and baboon: 'If I have hung on these details with pleasure, they are interesting to a soul like mine, delighted with the most simple objects.' Also of interest to Le Vaillant's soul were the simple Hottentots. He was imbued with Rousseau's philosophy of The Noble Savage – indeed, he later christened a son Jean Jacques Rousseau. He praises the Khoi for their primitive and uncorrupted ways and devotes several pages to his dalliance with a certain Narina of the Gonaqua tribe, 'the younger sister of the graces, under the figure of a female Hottentot.' Elsewhere he hints at conquests amongst the wives and daughters of the colonists, stating that some of the merchandise he carried in his wagons was 'necessary to gain their affections, and perhaps something more when the opportunity offers.' His advances were not always welcome. Campbell tells of the 75-year-old widow Van der Westhuizen giving Le Vaillant 'a good drubbing with a shambuck... for speaking improperly of her daughters.'

Le Vaillant made two major journeys into the southern African interior, one east in 1781-2, the other north in 1783-4. His intention at the outset of his second journey was 'to traverse Africa from south to north.' This, along with his later claim to have 'conquered a small portion of the earth,' attracted him considerable scorn. It is worth remembering, though, that his journeys, despite these grandiloquent claims and despite the fact that he broke no new ground, were considerable undertakings in an age when travel was often dangerous and always slow. He had close encounters with an enraged elephant, a rhinoceros, a lioness guarding her cubs, and a 'tyger' – almost certainly a leopard. His experiences in wildest Africa, though, paled in comparison to the savagery he encountered a few years after his return to civilised France. Le Vaillant's *Travels*, ghost written for him by the poet Casimir Varon, was published a year after the storming of

the Bastille and subsequent Declaration of the Rights of Man. The idealism of 1789 was gradually effaced by a tide of blood, and by 1793 Robespierre had the whole of France in the grip of his Great Terror. The guillotine's triangular blade fell with a terrible rhythm as workmen set about digging a sangueduct to channel blood down to the Seine. Le Vaillant, possibly because he had sent King Louis XVI a giraffe skin from Africa, was arrested and imprisoned. Every day, during those long months when the reign of terror was at its height, he would hear the wheels of the death-carts rumble over the blood-soaked cobbles and wonder whether he would be next. He was saved by the fall of Robespierre, set free the very day the tyrant fell victim to his own instrument of death.

LE VAILLANT.

What sort of man was François le Vaillant? This is the question Jane Meiring asks in the closing sequence of *The Truth in Masquerade* (1973), her account of Le Vaillant as he wished to be seen by his contemporaries. 'Was he charlatan, clown, showman, masquerader, dandy, gourmet, scientist, philanthropist, naturalist, romantic?' She answers her own question: 'He was undoubtedly something of all these things, but above all, he was a romantic. If, as Barrow suggested, he was "an unblushing liar" too, what, Lord Byron asked, "is a lie? 'Tis but the Truth in Masquerade."' Meiring's summing up reminds me of Oscar Wilde, himself something of a dandy. Wilde spoke of the truth of masks. He questioned the notion that an honest person tells the truth. People are often least themselves when they speak in their own person. They can be most themselves when they lie, pretend, invent, dream, joke, when they are ill or mad or drunk or don a mask. Wilde

championed lies. He felt they contained a deeper truth than the dissembling sincerity of the self. He knew from his writing that thinly veiled versions of himself usually proved inauthentic, while invented characters could be truer, more vital, than anyone that had ever lived.

There is certainly a truth of sorts to Le Vaillant's masquerades. I cannot agree with Professor Forbes when he writes: 'How much wiser it would have been if he had eschewed all exaggerations, distortions and inventions, and had written only the plain tale of his travels.' Plain tales, I have tried to show, contain their own brand of falsehood. The loose idea of honesty does not stand up to the hard idea of truth. The pioneer travellers of southern Africa, inhibited by the repressive conventionalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, typically made light of their several hardships. One has to read between the lines in Robert Gordon, say, or John Barrow, to catch glimpses of real human emotion, of their melancholy on sleepless nights in a wagon deep in the interior of a hostile continent, or of their joy at encountering a great river after months of thirst. Le Vaillant is refreshingly free of this tight-lipped machismo. One could argue that his overblown accounts convey the excitement of new experiences more accurately than those of his contemporaries. No doubt much of the scorn heaped on Le Vaillant stemmed from envy. The five volumes of his adventures in southern Africa were more widely read than any other work on the region published in the eighteenth century. And his contribution to southern African ornithology was immense, returning from his travels, as he did, with even his tea, coffee and sugar chests stuffed full of birds.

Some time in 1783 François le Vaillant approached the Orange near Ramansdrif. His oxen were lowing pitifully for water, and he had long been searching the horizon for the green trees that he felt sure must border the river. Instead, all he saw were 'vast mountains, naked and scorched.' Then, suddenly, the sound of rushing water was upon

him. Le Vaillant dashed headlong for the river, and leapt in fully clothed. He was joined by those of his men not in charge of wagons, by horses and unspanned oxen, by Kees, a cockerel and his pack of dogs – 'the barking, cries and transport of this galloping crowd resembled a troop of bachanals rather than a company of famished travellers.' Ramansdrif proved an ideal spot to set up camp. There were several species of birds to add to his collection. There were carp and barbel in the river and game was abundant – springbok, kudu, zebra, ostrich, hippo. Visiting Nama told him of giraffe to the north. Le Vaillant, who had yet to see a giraffe, crossed the river with ten men. Two weeks later, on the 'most valuable' day of his travels, he encountered seven of these fabled creatures. While his dogs harassed one of them, Le Vaillant, so he claims, shot it. 'I had enriched natural history; I had destroyed romance and erected a truth of my own.' Several contemporaries argued that this was indeed a truth of his own. As already mentioned, Robert Gordon retorted: 'Barend Vrije shot Vaillant's giraffe... Vaillant took Barend Vry's horse for a giraffe and stalked it and nearly shot it dead.' Henry Lichtenstein writes: 'When Le Vaillant asserts that he has seen the giraffe trot, he spares me any farther trouble in proving that this animal never presented itself alive before him.' In fact Le Vaillant casts doubt on his own version of events. In the frontispiece to his first volume he is pictured, in dandified fashion, stalking his giraffe. His wagons,

supposedly miles away on the opposite bank of the river, appear in the background.

We stopped for a mid-morning break at Abbassas. This date palm oasis, supposedly spawned by a British soldier spitting out pips, was as hot as the tin mugs from which we sipped our tea. An hour or so later, the river increasingly hemmed in by Le Vaillant's vast mountains, naked and scorched, we approached Ramansdrif. On the Namibian bank, opposite the broad shallow rapid that must have served as the *drif* - ford, a wedge of level ground climbed an amphitheatre-like valley that led, no doubt, through some passable defile and on to the arid north. Quite how the early travellers breached the mass of rock on the South African bank, though, wasn't at all clear from the vantage point of our kayaks.

Ramansdrif, then known as Company's Drift, was already an established ford by the time the exhuberant Le Vaillant leapt into the river in 1783. Hendrik Hop and Robert Gordon had each preceded him. The first recorded crossing of the Orange by Europeans in 1738 most likely occurred either at Ramansdrif or ten kilometres downstream at Goodhouse. To fully appreciate the story of this crossing, though, one needs some sense of the early explorers sent out from the castle by Jan van Riebeeck. To the unexplored north, so he believed, lay the black Christian Empire of Prester John and the famed kingdom of Monomotapa, supposedly the source of much gold then flowing to the Portuguese on the east coast of Africa. He hoped also to discover that great favourite of early cartographers, the Rio de Infanta with the mythical city of Vigite Magna on its banks. Van Riebeeck, we can assume, no longer subscribed to the fantasies of the monks who mapped the world in the Dark Ages, filling distant seas with the copperplate warning 'Here Be Dragons' and Africa with such oddities as two-headed people and the roc, a bird large enough to carry an elephant through the air.

Jan Wintervogel, *lustige bosloper*, pioneered the road to the north in 1655. Van Riebeeck's personal surgeon, an intrepid Dane named Pieter van Meerhof, accompanied each of the six official expeditions to be sent out between 1660 and 1664. He was the first European to make contact with the Namaqua nation: 'Then I, Pieter van Meerhof, took a pipe of tobacco in my mouth and went to see if they knew aught of tobacco... They tried to smoke, but for the most part could not; the king blew the smoke from him instead of drawing it in. I took his pipe and showed him four or five times how to draw it. He began to learn; they all learned while we were here, as well the women as the men, so that there has come a madness for tobacco among them.' A madness well documented by subsequent travellers.

'Quaint people in Africa', Sebastian Münster (1544).

Van Meerhof is sure to have overnighted at Heerenlogenment, or Gentleman's Lodgings, during his travels. It later became a tradition for travellers on the north road to camp at this cave south of the Olifants River and write their names on the wall. F. Vailant, as he sometimes spelled his name, certainly did.

The expeditions of the 1660s suffered great hardship on the quartzite plains of the Knersvlakte, or Gnashing Flats. Some turned back, reporting that there was nothing to be found save salt and sand and thirst. This is no disgrace, given that these brave pioneers travelled on foot beside their pack oxen and were often hair-raisingly ill-prepared. They navigated by compass and the stars, as if their sojourn at the Cape had come to an end and they were now sailing on to India. Those that crunched on over the littered quartz and the cryptic stone-like plants, over the briny trickle of the Sout River into Namaqualand proper, heard news of 'a great water' to the north.

Van Meerhof retired from exploration and married Krotoa, a servant in the Van Riebeecks' household and the first Khoi to be converted to Christianity. Northward exploration was rekindled twenty years later when the Namaqua brought copper to Commander Simon van der Stel. Ensign Olof Bergh opened the road to the Kamiesberg, but it was left to Van der Stel himself, travelling with a 61-person entourage and 289 pack and draught oxen, to find copper near present-day Springbok in 1685. His attempt to press on north was defeated by the frightening aridity of the Koa flats that stretch from Springbok to the Orange River. There was a lull of thirty-odd years before the colonists thrust northward once again, spurred on this time by hunting, trading and raiding.

The first recorded group of Europeans to cross the Orange left the Piketberg area some time before the ploughing season of 1738. The colonists Swart, Campher, Van der Walde, Van Dyk, Lourens, Gous, Pulter, Ras, Willensz and Van Wyk headed north on an illegal

hunting and trading mission into Namaqualand. Their wagons were laden with powder, lead, iron, copper, beads, tobacco and knives. They bartered cattle with the Little Namaqua and then proceeded across the river to the kraal of Gal, chief of the Great Namaqua. During their stay Willem Van Wyk married a relative of the chief '*na der Hottentotten wiyse* - in Hottentot fashion.' He had to conduct and clothe himself according to Nama custom, and submit to an initiation ceremony that involved being urinated on. Wikar reports that in such a ceremony the initiatee was 'cleaned with fat; and then the old men urinate on him for three successive days; next he is cleansed with the blood of an animal killed for that purpose; and lastly he is again washed and rubbed with fat.' Not surprisingly, Van Wyk achieved a certain notoriety in the colony, and became known as Willem Namaqua. His marriage seems to have been a ruse. The colonists slipped away quietly one night, armed their Khoi servants, and instructed them to attack Gal's kraal. Seven Namaqua, Gal included, died in the dawn attack. When the colonists, now back in Piketberg, failed to honour their agreement to share the spoils, the servants, led by Swartbooij and his son Titus, reported the incident to the authorities. Their story was corroborated by Gaaren, son of Gal, who had travelled all the way to Cape Town in pursuit of justice. This incident, along with the authorities' sluggish response to it, sparked an escalation in Khoisan resistance to Dutch colonialism and was, according to historian Nigel Penn, one of the major causes of the frontier war of 1739. The authorities' attempts to retrieve the stolen cattle, on the other hand, fanned the smouldering resentment of the frontier colonists, many of whom rose in a burgher rebellion. Such was the legacy of the first recorded instance of colonial violence along the banks of the Orange – the first of many.

The next known European to reach the banks of the Orange was one Jacobus Coetsé, Jansz. His slight fame rests on the literary

exploits of his descendant J.M. Coetzee. The latter half of the novella *Dusklands* (1983) is given over to 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,' an account in three sections of Jacobus's journey into the southern African interior. The third section is a transcript of an authentic historical document:

> **A Narrative supplied by order of the Right Honourable Ryk Tulbagh, Councillor Extraordinary of Dutch India and Governor of the Cape of Good Hope and Dependencies thereof etc., etc., etc., by the Burger Jacobus Coetsé (Jan's Son) concerning the Journey made by him in and through the Land of the Great Amacquas.**

J.M. Coetzee suggests that the official deposition of Jacobus Coetsé is the work of a 'Castle hack' who, with typically bureaucratic impatience, only recorded information thought to be of commercial value to the Company. He argues that a more complete picture of this obscure farmer who set off north to hunt elephants along the Orange requires 'a positive act of the imagination.' And this is precisely what the first two sections of 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' are. We learn, for instance, that at their halt of August 18, 1760, the expedition left behind 'the ashes of the night fire, combustion complete, a feature of dry climates; faeces dotted in mounds over a broad area, herbivore in the open, carnivore behind rocks; urine stains with minute traces of copper salts; tea leaves; the leg-bones of a springbok; five inches of braided oxhide rope; tobacco ash; and a musket ball. The faeces dried in the course of the day. Rope and bones were eaten by a hyena on August 22. A storm on November 2 scattered all else.'

Little is known about the actual Jacobus Coetsé. The archives tell us he was the grandson of Dirk Coetsé, founder of the Coetzee family, who arrived at the Cape in 1679. The company records show that Jacobus was in arrears with his 'Lion and Tiger Money,' a tax for

eradicating vermin. If his deposition is to be trusted, he left Piketberg with two wagons and twelve Khoi servants. Between the Olifants and Groene Rivers he shot the only two elephant of his trip. Coetsé took forty days to reach the Great River. He forded at Goodhouse, met a group of Great Namaqua, found them to be gentle and friendly. At his turning point, seven days north of the river, he was told of the Damroqua a further ten days to the north, people with 'a tawny or yellow appearance, long hair, and clothed in linen.' On his way back to the river Coetsé shot two giraffe. We must assume the rest of his journey passed without incident.

The story of the light-skinned, long-haired people clad in linen inspired Hendrik Hop, Captain of the Cape Burgher Cavalry, to lead an official expedition north the following year. He also wanted to see whether Coetsé's giraffe, thought to be a camel of sorts, could be pressed into the service of the Company. Hop took two months to reach Ramansdrif: 'Towards evening we came to said river which we found to be flowing swiftly between steep banks with high stony mountains on either side... The inhabitants call it Ein, and also Gariep, while on certain different maps of this region, about this Latitude, a river is marked with the name River Saint Anthony.' Other cartographic traditions labelled this river the Cammisa or the Espirito Santo. Louis Pisani, on his map of 1793, called it the Rio Grando Rio de Oranie. Of the many names to precede Orange, Gariep and Grootrivier are the only two still in use. They both mean Great River. Hop's party forded at Ramansdrif and proceeded north. They encountered giraffe and, satisfied that they would make poor beasts of burden, shot them. They never found the light-skinned linen-wearers. This is hardly surprising, as Damroqua was another name for the Herero, whose territory lay not a few days to the north, but six hundred kilometres away over desert terrain. And besides, the Herero were dark-skinned and didn't wear linen. The reference, garbled in

translation, was probably to the Portuguese who had colonised southern Angola in 1575.

Carel Brink, surveyor, map-maker and scribe, introduces Hop's company as follows:

> It consisted of the following 17 Europeans, viz:
>
> Sr. Hendrik Hop, Commander of the Expedition.
> Carel Frederick Brink, Land Surveyor.
> Johan Andries Auge, Gardener.
> Carel Christoffel Rykvoet, Burgher Surgeon.
> Jacobus Coetsee, Jansz., burgher
> Hendrik Cruger "
> Abraham Russouw "
> ... "
> ... "
> Besides 68 bastard hottentots.

Who are these nameless 68 who travelled north of the Orange with Hendrik Hop? They faced the same challenges and dangers, experienced the same doubts and fears, did more than their share of the work, we can be sure, and yet have been swept aside by the tide of history. All the European travellers we have considered – the Dutchmen Van Meerhof, Van der Stel and Gordon, the Swedes Thunberg, Sparrman and Wikar, the Englishmen Barrow, Burchell, Campbell and Thompson, the Frenchman Le Vaillant, the German Lichtenstein, as well as the many colonists of whom Willem Namaqua and friends and Jacobus Coetsé are merely the first to appear on the historical record – all of them were accompanied on their pioneering endeavours by Khoisan and Baster servants, guides and sometime companions. Indeed, these people now lost in nameless oblivion were crucial to the success of these expeditions, given their knowledge of the terrain, their skill in handling oxen, and their ability to communicate with local tribes.

One of the 68 '*basterd hottentotten*' with Hop was Claas Barends, ultratraveller, later one of the founders of the Griqua people. Barends had accompanied Jacobus Coetsé the previous year, though Coetsé does not mention him. We know this from the opening words of Wikar's journal: 'When, after encountering many dangers, I reached the Great River, I found some Hottentots from Little Namaqualand at the Goedous below the Company's Ford... The head of the party was the Hottentot Claas Barend, a Goeyeman Hottentot from the neighbourhood of the Cape, who had previously been on an expedition with Jac Koetzee to the Great Namaquas and was now living here.' When Wikar encountered him, Barends had a cattle kraal at the junction of the Orange and Dabenoris Rivers, just east of Goodhouse. He hunted up the Orange River valley and traded with the Great Namaqua. In 1778-9 he travelled far upriver on three separate occasions, twice with Wikar and once, on the Swede's recommendation, with Robert Gordon. And it's almost certain, given Gordon's rant about Le Vaillant's giraffe ('Klaas expressed it a 'miserable cow'... not nearly as large as mine which he also helped to slaughter'), that the man the Frenchman refers to as Klaas Bastard and 'my hottentot Klaas' is Barends once again. To have accompanied any one of Coetsé, Hop, Wikar, Gordon or Le Vaillant on their travels would have been a noteworthy achievement. Claas Barends accompanied them all – and yet his story has been relegated to the footnotes of history.

A year or two after Le Vaillant's visit, a group of renegade colonists trekked over the *Grootrivier* and settled in Great Namaqualand. The river was considered '*de grenschijding tuschen de Christenin en Namaqua Hottentotten* - the boundary between the Christians and Namaquas' and crossing it was forbidden. Guilliam Visagie, already convicted for attempted murder, and Barend Vry, the alleged killer of Le Vaillant's giraffe, immediately set about attacking

Khoi kraals. Cornelius Kok, who lived south of the river in Namaqualand, observed that the new arrivals, who were sometimes this side of the river, and sometimes that, were remarkable men. They crossed with barely enough oxen to pull a wagon, and yet each time returned with huge herds of livestock. Reports of their cattle raiding activities eventually reached the Cape and warrants were issued for their arrest. When the authorities discovered that Visagie's sixty-year-old wife Elsabé had recently trekked down from the Orange River to Cape Town with two wagon-loads of goods, she was dragged before a magistrate and told that complaints had been coming in 'ever since you rogues, scum and deserters have been in the veld.' She was placed under house arrest for two months before being allowed to return north. Visagie and Vry were eventually acquitted thanks to the political influence of the Van Reenen family. Willem van Reenen, who went looking for gold north of the river in 1791, reported that 'the said Visagie treated me most kindly and gave me servicable Hottentots.' Visagie would readily have replenished Van Reenen's oxen as well, only 'those of his still surviving were thin and in poor condition because his wife had taken 9 months on the journey from Modderfontein to the Cape and back home again.' Not your average visit to the corner store.

As we paddled past Ramansdrif, past the solitary dwelling on the Namibian bank, it seemed to me so unlikely that this remote spot on a little-travelled river, hemmed in north and south by barren mountains, should loom so large in the story of the pioneer travellers. I considered the low-roofed structure, dwarfed by the peaks behind it, and thought of Alexander Scotland, storekeeper and spy, one of the few people ever to have lived at this lonely outpost. Nephew to George Bernard Shaw, Scotland worked as an office boy for a Mincing Lane tea merchant, and as a clerk in John Sainsbury's grocery business, before arriving in South Africa as a twenty-year-old in 1902.

He had wanted to fight the Boers, but the war was over by the time he landed. Scotland's uncle was director of a trading company called South African Territories and offered him a job as manager of their store at Ramansdrif, on the German side of the river. It was, in the words of Lawrence Green, a place of refreshment between two deserts. Scotland took to the hard, stony country. He rode the unmapped mountains in a cart drawn by four mules and two horses, taking orders for canned food, biscuits, delicatessen in tins, sweets, and soft drinks. 'The rangy desert bushland of the south,' reports Scotland in his autobiography *The London Cage* (1957), 'among the Hottentots and Hereros, the Klipkaffir, the Bondel and Namaqua natives – and among the Germans – was my trading map.' He had a gift for languages and became fluent in Nama and German. With the advent of the Nama revolt of 1904-7, a German commandant asked Scotland to provide his troops with *Liebesgaben* - comfort parcels. Soon thereafter, thanks to his impeccable German, he became Hauptman Schottland, officer responsible for the distribution of food supplies.

Scotland tells of his apprenticeship in intelligence in a chapter titled 'Bushland Intelligence School.' A British liaison officer drew him aside on a 'dry, dusty, blazing afternoon' at Ramansdrif and whispered: 'Learn all you can about the German Army, and one day you will be a valuable man to your country.' Over the next ten years he gained an intimate knowledge of German military organisation, and came to know the habits and attitudes of German soldiers. This knowledge stood him in good stead during his espionage and interrogation work in the two world wars. Shortly before the outbreak of war in 1914, Scotland sent a bulky parcel to Upington. It contained up-to-date military maps and full details of the German staff, their regular and reserve companies, their camel, machine-gun and flying corps, their telegraph stations, transport columns, supply depots and

defensive positions. Green suggests that this was probably the most comprehensive document of its kind ever supplied by a spy in enemy territory. Scotland was arrested soon thereafter and spent almost a year in a Windhoek prison. Only the personal intervention of General Smuts spared him the death sentence. On his release, he returned to England and joined army intelligence. For two years, in France, he interrogated prisoners and slipped behind enemy lines posing as an *Auslands Deutscher* - a German from overseas. 'I was, and still am,' he writes of his natural camouflage, 'an unusually ordinary-looking individual.'

In the next war Scotland ran the Prisoner of War Interrogation Section. In 1945 his section was renamed the War Crimes Investigation Unit. They conducted pre-trial interrogations at a house in Kensington known as the London Cage. One of the crimes Scotland investigated was the murder of fifty British prisoners of war after a mass breakout from Stalag Luft III, a POW camp near the Polish border. The escape was planned by my grandmother's cousin, Roger Bushell. I knew the basic story from the film *The Great Escape*: Big X (the Bushell character) and his 'great plan'; the digging of three tunnels, Tom, Dick and Harry; the preparation of clothing, maps, forged documents; how Tom was discovered and how Harry, the one hundredth tunnel to be attempted at Sagan, surfaced several yards short of the woods; how 76 men escaped, and all but three were recaptured. What I didn't know was how and why Bushell had died. Nor what had happened to his killers. Scotland and his team traced the Sagan execution order to Berlin. Hitler had demanded that all the escapees be shot. When Goering

protested that this was in contravention of Geneva, Hitler screamed that 'more than half of these men are to be shot' and stormed from the room. Himmler decided on fifty men and sent out the *Kugel* - bullet order. Squadron Leader Bushell, en route back to camp, so he thought, was shot by the roadside while relieving himself. The order from Berlin had specifically stated that the executions should take place '*während einer Pinkelpause* - during a pee break.' Bushell's killer was among the thirteen Germans hanged for the murders in 1948.

Scotland gained instant fame during the trial of Field-Marshal Kesselring in Venice. When the prosecution asked Scotland a question about the German Army, the defence objected on the grounds that he had never been in the German Army. 'Colonel Scotland,' asked the prosecutor, 'were you ever in the German Army?'

'Yes.'

This reply caused a riot in the British press. 'Britain's Master Spy' and 'Scotland of the Wehrmacht' ran the headlines the next day, 'Amazing Career of Bernard Shaw's Nephew.' Lawrence Green visited Alexander Scotland, O.B.E., in his London flat some years later. He took along photographs of the Bondelswarts and of the mud fort at Warmbad, of the harsh stony plains and the rugged mountains. Scotland sat looking at the photographs, reflecting on his time at Ramansdrif: 'Lord,' he declared, 'how well I was during my years there.'

And how well *we* were at Ramansdrif, our bodies hard and responsive, our minds shaved down and focused. On the hour-long paddle from Ramansdrif to Goodhouse we would clock one thousand kilometres. Laurence would kill his thousandth horsefly and Christopher, for the thousandth time, would sit back, contemplate the glory of our surrounds, and announce: 'I wonder what the rich are doing today.' And we had the energy, just then, for a few thousand

more. It was Rupert Brooke, I think, the poet who fell in the corner of some foreign field, who wanted to walk one thousand miles and write one thousand plays and sing one thousand poems and drink one thousand pots of beer and kiss one thousand girls. And if it wasn't him, no matter, you get my drift – god was on our side as we boomed on by a magnificent *Ficus cordata* - Namaqua fig which had flattened itself to a cliff face on the south bank.

Eighty kilometres due north of the stretch of river between Ramansdrif and Goodhouse is the settlement of Guruchas. It was here, in 1922, that the Bondelswarts Nama were bombed into submission by the Smuts government for objecting to a dog tax. After the Nama uprising of 1904-7, the Germans scuttled the surviving Bondelswarts into a reserve comprising less than five percent of their former territory. When South Africa overran the Germans in 1914, the Bondelswarts hoped that their tribal lands would be restored to them. They soon discovered, though, that the difference between imperialists was a matter of degree, not one of principle. The South African administration in Windhoek, undeterred by the fact that the League of Nations had entrusted them with a mandate to exercise 'benevolent guidance' over the people of South West Africa, cut up the former Bondelswarts land and sold it to white settlers, and then, in a measure designed to force the Bondels into the service of these settlers, imposed a tax of one pound sterling on their hunting dogs. The Bondelswarts were seething with bitterness and discontent when, like a match to a powderkeg, their legendary hero Abraham Morris returned from exile.

Morris had fought alongside Marengo in the Nama uprising, and had fled to the Union when the Germans eventually gained the upper hand. Now fifty years old, having recently lost his wife, he decided to recross the Orange and live out his days with his people. When the administration tried to arrest the old outlaw – who,

incidentally, had acted as a guide for their invading army in 1914 – hundreds of Bondels stood in their way. The administration demanded they surrender their arms. The Bondels refused. The Administrator, a Mr. Hofmeyr, transformed himself into Colonel Hofmeyr and determined to strike 'a severe and lasting' blow. Smuts sent two aeroplanes from the Union, as well as two mountain guns and four Vickers machine-guns. The South West Africans mounted one of the machine-guns on a Model-T Ford. Hofmeyr's forces won the early skirmishes and forced the Bondelswarts back towards Guruchas. At 3 p.m. the following day two aeroplanes appeared low on the horizon. They made a wide turn over Guruchas and on their second pass dropped six cannisters over the settlement. The bombs took an age to fall, tumbling slowly in the silence left by the snarling machines, before erupting into terrible cascades of sand and stone and flesh.

Smuts had a reputation for responding brutally to community action. The year before, at Bulhoek near Queenstown, his police fired on and killed or wounded three hundred 'Israelites', members of a separatist church led by Enoch Mgijima. A letter printed in *The Star* newspaper of 17 May 1921 provides an interesting link between the Israelite massacre and that of the Bondelswarts: 'When dealing with natives and especially with the religious fanatics like the 'Israelites', enough stress cannot be laid on the value of moral effect... Half a dozen low-flying aeroplanes, using bombs and machine-guns, would clear up the trouble quickly, safely and cheaply – besides creating a lasting impression on the rebel mind. An aerial strike would never be forgotten.' Did this letter, I wonder, ever find its way to the prime minister's desk?

The bombing of Guruchas certainly created a lasting impression. That night the men returned from the hills to the gruesome confusion of the village, women and children dead, stock decimated. They held a council of war, at which their hereditary chief

Jacobus Christian voted to surrender. As he later said: '*Wy hadden geen plannen omdat die vliegmachines ons bedonderd gescoten het* - we had no plans because the flying machines shot us to pieces.' Abraham Morris, though, their *Vechts-kaptein* - fighting captain, urged them to take the fight to the tangled hills along the Orange River. In spite of the bombing, or possibly because of it, Morris was determined not to give up the last vestige of his people's independence. He had, perhaps, come to realise during his long years of exile that his own deep-rooted destiny was inextricably linked to the freedom of his people. Later that night 250 Bondelswarts fighting men, driving their small stock ahead of them, slipped through the enemy cordon to the south. There was to be no repeat, though, of 1904-7 heroics. The aeroplanes spotted the smoke of their campfires and dropped stick bombs. A Captain Prinsloo raced ahead and cut off their access to the vital waters of the Orange. Prinsloo reprovisioned at Goodhouse and then pursued the Bondels up the Haib River gorge. He engaged them at a place called Bergkamer. The exhausted, starving Bondels proved no match for the administration's forces. Three or four of them crouched behind each gun, ready to take over when the gun-carrier fell. They had a handful of *sterk gewere* - modern rifles, but for the rest it was *rook gewere* - obsolete muzzle loaders. Forty-nine Bondelswarts were killed, including Morris, who in rallying his men had constantly exposed himself to enemy fire. Three of his men died trying to pull him to safety. Prinsloo returned to Goodhouse, reprovisioned, and resumed the chase. Four days later the Bondelswarts surrendered. Their final stand against the inexorable advance of western imperialism was at an end. They had fought and lost what Richard Freislich calls, in the title to his 1964 study of the conflict, *The Last Tribal War*.

The manner in which the Bondelswarts were crushed was widely condemned. Smuts was branded a pitiless murderer. When

the matter came before the League of Nations, the question was asked whether it was appropriate for a country exercising 'a sacred trust of civilisation' to drop bombs on the inhabitants of its mandated territory, the very people it was supposed to be protecting, for no better reason than their refusal to pay tax on their dogs. Perhaps the last word on this sordid affair should go to Deneys Reitz, generally pro-Smuts, but sympathetic towards anyone fighting a colonising power, as he had been twenty years before: 'The Bondelswarts, from having been hardy freebooters, are now a fear-haunted people, so terrible was the reckoning of our machines; and I could not but feel sorry for this primitive community overwhelmed by civilisation. The impression they left on me was that they were more sinned against than sinning and I doubt whether to this day they know what it was all about.'

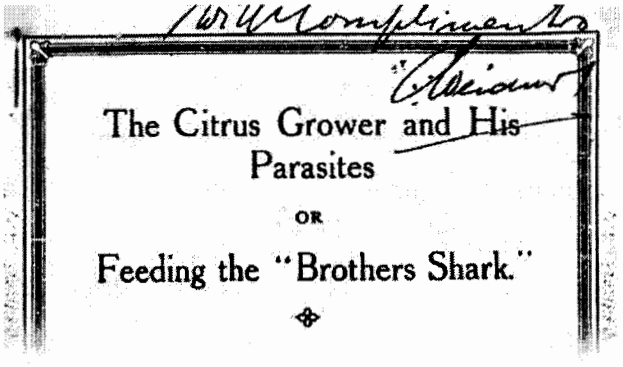
Reitz, writing in *No Outspan* (1943), abruptly changes tack: 'I enjoyed Carl Weidner's hospitality at Goodhouse for a week and as the temperature stood at 108 degrees in the shade from seven am to five pm daily, I spent most of my time swimming in the tepid waters of the Orange river.' We were about to experience this heat. At 2 p.m., the hottest time of the day, in late January, the hottest time of the year, we arrived at Goodhouse, the hottest place in the country. Laurence and I climbed the bank. A hundred metres from the river was a run-down colonial-style building, its colonnade and date palms resisting the sun's violent efforts to flatten them into the landscape. We pressed on, the heat parting before us like the flaps of so many Bedouin tents. There were dust devils everywhere, little vortexes swirling about our feet, great columns marching up the sandy valley. Samuel Cloete was sitting in the shade on the far side of the house. What does he do all day? I wondered. How does he survive in this god-forsaken place? These weren't congenial questions, though, so I asked about Goodhouse and its history. 'There's Goodhouse's history,' said Samuel, pointing to two graves enclosed by a low whitewashed wall. I

left him and Laurence in the relative cool of the veranda, and ventured out once more into the furnace heat.

Samuel had guided me to the final resting place of Carl and Caroline Weidner, who together, so read the inscription, established Goodhouse in 1913. If you have never heard of Weidner of Goodhouse, writes Lawrence Green in *To the River's End* (1948), then you know nothing of the Orange River. Carl Weidner, born in Germany in 1869, worked in Belgium, German South West Africa and Cape Town (where he planned a canal linking Table Bay to False Bay), before settling at Goodhouse. Of Caroline Weidner I know nothing more than what her gravestone told me – beloved wife, neé Dusek, 1876-1945. We must assume that she stood by Weidner's side, and that little if any of what he achieved would have been possible without her endless fortitude.

Weidner built a pont across the Orange and his portly figure soon became a fixture to early motorists on the north road. For the next forty years he lived by the motto engraved above the door of his shop: *Alis Volat Propiis* - on his own wings he flies. Original,

resourceful and hard working, Weidner planted citrus trees and turned Goodhouse into an oasis between two deserts. He kept detailed records of the weather – temperatures in the high forties were quite normal, and summer nights seldom dipped below 35°C. Weidner, it appears, would have concurred with A. A. Anderson, he of twenty-five years in a wagon fame, that life in the desert affords the mind unlimited action. A regular stream of pamphlets, with titles such as 'That Idiot the Farmer' and 'The Fallacy of Schwarz's Kalahari Rain-making magic' found their way from Goodhouse down to the Cape. Weidner observes, in the latter pamphlet, that while he has the greatest admiration for professors in general, he is not prepared to follow them blindly. He proceeds, not without elegance, to debunk Professor E.H. Schwarz's plan to divert rivers into the dry pans of the Kalahari, thereby increasing the evaporation and thus the rainfall over southern Africa. He pooh-poohs the professor's basic premise that southern Africa is drying up. Deneys Reitz appears to have misunderstood his friend Weidner's position. Flying over Goodhouse during the flood of 1934, he saw that only the roof of Weidner's homestead was visible above the deluge. Reitz dropped Weidner a message: 'Terribly sorry, but you said South Africa was drying up.' Small wonder that Weidner, who was surveying the scene from a nearby rise, shook his fist at the plane. In 'The Citrus Grower and his Parasites' Weidner considers whether it pays to grow oranges. He concludes that although it doesn't pay the grower himself, it certainly pays the Brothers Shark, that is the ice shark (refrigeration), the land shark (agent) and the sea shark (shipping). Reading


With Compliments
The Citrus Grower and His Parasites
OR
Feeding the "Brothers Shark."

Weidner's pamphlets, one gets a powerful sense of his uncut, somewhat eccentric intelligence. On his own wings he flew. When Green visited Weidner for the last time in 1947 he found him, at age 78, full of plans and the energy to execute them. Weidner died two years later, and his oasis with him.

We took leave of Weidner's sandy legacy. A strong wind had picked up. It funnelled upstream, plucking at the current, lifting it into waves. Christopher jumped into the single and charged off into what I can only describe as a cross between a tempestuous sea, a sandstorm, and the blast from an industrial hairdryer. A dust devil on the south bank ventured out over the water, right across our bows. For the first time I understood the power of Psalm 42, my favourite bit of Bible: 'Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts.' We howled and roared and yawped our way into the mayhem – elemental, vigorous, vital. When Carel Brink, scribe to Hop's expedition, reported that 'the west wind raged strongly on the 25th and raised so many wavelets on the river,' he might have been commenting, not on the happenings of the 25th of September 1761, but on this, the twenty-fifth day of our expedition.

We woke early – to stillness and desert clarity. The river was subdued, heavy, not yet reflecting the red dawn that would soon start creeping down the mountains opposite. We packed in silence, walked our boats out through the clay shallows. When the water was knee-deep we flipped down the rudders, climbed into the cockpits, fitted our spraydecks and edged out into the current. This operation would have caused us great difficulties in the first week of our trip, now we did it half asleep. We had decided to forgo tea and rusks so as to make time in the still of morning. The heat of Abbassas, Ramansdrif, Goodhouse and the Richtersveld warms the air, causes it to rise. By

early afternoon an intense low pressure cell has formed and coastal air rushes in to take its place. Cheating the afternoon wind wasn't the only reason for our early departure, though. Like horses bolting for the stable, we yearned for the green lawns of Provenance. Felix Unite's camp at Noordoewer was some seventy kilometres downstream. We had arranged to meet our friends Nick and Danielle there the following afternoon. If we got to Provenance today we'd be compelled to take a day off!

Despite the withering heat and flat, slow-moving water, the kilometres passed without effort. We established an easy rhythm and kept breaks to a minimum. Though the mountains grew even starker and the riverine bush all but disappeared, there was life all around us. We saw a snake hunting ducks. Laurence noticed a baby puffadder learning to swim, lifted it onto his blade. A leguaan lay on a rock in the middle of a rapid. Two juvenile baboons were dangling from roots on a mud embankment, trying to get their hands into bee-eater and swallow nests as the birds dive-bombed them. Up above us, silhouetted against the blue, a hammerkop practised stall turns. A lone human figure ghosted into view. He was some distance from the river, standing in the shade of the only tree for miles, silhouetted, stick-like against the red slope behind. What was he doing here? Herding a few pitiful animals, yes, but why here in this impossibly remote place? I took out the map. Contours converged, mountains intensified, there was no access for miles. Even farm names had ceased. All the map showed, besides the river and the densely packed contours, was the pink borderline between Namibia and South Africa, and the blue dashes of dry watercourses, the Witloop, the Oernoep, the Nougaseb.

In the early afternoon the mountains began to recede. A breeze sprang up, but it remained gentle, unfunnelled. At Vioolsdrif, once an irrigation scheme, now a sad border post, we passed under a bridge and turned north into the Great Bend of the Orange that bounds

the Richtersveld. The barren cliffs to our left hinted at the moonscape to come. We docked for beer at Fiddlers camp, then pressed on, as the river curled west, into the glare of the setting sun. We beached, as instructed by Felix, at a boatshed crammed with Indian canoes. Bjørn, the camp manager, met us at the edge of Provenance's perfectly manicured lawns. A big friendly chubby blonde with an email address starting 'tonguescrub' – a cross, if you like, between a cherub and a biker. Bjørn fed us beers in the bar. As the day burnt out to violet, we walked over to the edge of the lawn, looked down at the gleaming Orange as it snaked off into the tortured landscape of the Richtersveld. We set up camp on grass too soft and level for us, drank more beer, talked nonsense, ate roast lamb-potato-butternut, felt our skeletons being removed from our bodies, and barely made it to our sleeping bags in time.

VII

'Come get your *mieliepap*,' shouted Bjørn. I felt as if I was surfacing from three foot down in sticky mud. I staggered through hot sun to the showers, grabbed hold of a basin, looked in the mirror. I hardly recognised myself – straw hair, wild eyes, a nasty beard fanning out sideways from my jaw. I splashed my face and joined the others, sat down in front of a bowl of decadent *mieliepap* - maize porridge made with milk, butter and sugar. After breakfast we prepared for our final push to the sea. Bjørn proved invaluable. In addition to his regular roles of cook, quartermaster and barman, he took us shopping in Noordoewer, straightened our rudders in the workshop, sharpened Chris's knife, fixed Laurence's walkman, and entertained us with stories of his time at Provenance, generally lewd.

During the first week of our trip, gathered around the campfire at Witsloot Canyon, Felix had told us the story of Provenance. In 1971 Neil Jowell and Ian Myers paddled the Orange from Vioolsdrif to Sendelingsdrif in homemade canoes, past shepherds who had never seen people on the water, prospectors who ran off with their donkeys.

The following year Jan Graaff joined them. He fell in love with the dry reaches of the Orange, and paddled the stretch from Pella to Sendelingsdrif twice a year for the next ten years. On one eventful trip, Graaff and Myers launched in K1s, Jowell and a dentist named Josephson in a K2. J and J hit a rock in Pella rapid, and arrived independently at the pool below, each in half a K2. They could still see the dust of the truck that had dropped them off as it made its way back through Canyon Pass. Pella had little to offer, so they walked fifty kilometres to Aggeneys. Jowell looked so bedraggled that no-one would lend him the ten cents he needed to put through a call to his trucking business in Springbok. Josephson had coins in his pocket, but he wasn't going to let on – here was the richest man in Namaqualand reduced to the state of a bum. Back on the river, Graaff and Myers took separate channels and lost one another. Neither of them knew whether he was ahead of the other or behind. They next saw each other in Springbok. On another trip Graaff met an old man named Willem Oorlog III at Hartebeestmunt near the Kum Kum falls. Oorlog led Graaff to the mausoleum of a German patrol wiped out during the Nama uprising of 1904-7. Fifteen Germans had been killed, explained Willem in a squeaky voice, '*en oupa-grootjie het net twintig koeëls gebruik* - and great-grandfather only used twenty bullets.' Oorlog reached into the mausoleum and removed a skull. It had a bullet hole between the eyes. '*Kyk hoe netjies het oupa-grootjie geskiet* - look how neatly great-grandfather shot.'

In 1983 Felix joined Neil Jowell and Jan Graaff on the 'Flotilla ex Pella', their biggest trip to date. Felix was hooked, and decided to offer the experience commercially. He designed the Mohawk, a broad fibreglass canoe, and, after building twenty boats in two weeks, took his first group of clients down the Orange. Felix spent half of 1986 on the river, guiding twenty-one trips himself. His clients spent their first and last nights at a motel in Noordoewer managed by Carlos Peres.

Carlos left Angola in 1975, moved around for ten years, grew tired of cities, and settled on the Orange. In the late 1980s he and Felix became partners, and moved their land-based operation to Provenance. The river business boomed in the 90s. Anyone with a canoe and a *bakkie* became an operator. Today some ten thousand paddlers launch at Noordoewer each year. As I looked down at the river from the edge of Provenance's lawn, I realised I had become possessive of our remote waterway. I didn't like the idea of sharing it with so many other people.

Ian Myers and Neil Jowell weren't the first people to paddle long stretches of the Orange. In 1952 Desmond Watkins and six others flew into Basutoland, now Lesotho, and walked the river from its source '10 000 feet up at the back of Rockeries Pass in a vast grassy valley of yellow iris.' At Mokhotlong they launched in collapsible boats and paddled the headwaters for fourteen days. The following year Peter Gibbs and David Needham traversed the entire 2 250 kilometre length of the Orange, on foot in Basutoland, by canoe in South Africa. After finishing school, they worked for three months to finance the trip. Gibbs drove the 78-year-old Mrs Molteno through Bushmanland and the Richtersveld. He reports in his memoirs that this intrepid woman was still prospecting well into her eighties. Even if she failed to strike it rich, she claimed, she would not be too disappointed, for it was the wilderness deserts she liked, the sound of jackals, the sight of the *halfmens*, and maybe a cup of tea with a biscuit. Needham and Gibbs set off from the Mont-aux-Sources hotel carrying a hundred kilograms of supplies between them – a tent made of parachute material, sleeping bags and leather lumber jackets, a primus and paraffin, three dixie cans, hand-made draw bags of flour, sugar, porridge, fat, biltong, tea, and a twelve pound leg of ham. They hired a horse for the first few days, then battled along in twenty minute shifts, their thoughts drifting to Hillary's Everest expedition, and the tiny Sherpa porters who

would be carrying similar loads. They camped in snow near the source then headed downstream up the ridges and down the ravines of the winding Senqu. They hiked five hundred kilometres to the South African border, then caught a lift to Aliwal North. Here they met up with Gibbs's white bull-terrier, Biltong, who had been sent by rail from Cape Town with their Indian canoe. The canoe was sixteen foot long, made of tin sheets rivetted to a timber frame, reinforced with bitumenised hessian sacking. Laden, it weighed three hundred kilograms.

They paddled shakily out to midstream, so writes Gibbs, 'myself in the rear, David for'ard and Biltong padding about uncertainly amidships.' It was the first time they had sat in the canoe. A thousand miles of water lay ahead of them; the ship that would take them to their studies in England set sail in four months time. Gibbs reports that the journey became Biltong's as much as their own. On calm stretches he lay biting at bubbles as they floated by, and in rapids he watched with interest the passing rocks and waves. He fast learnt that 'Boat!' meant get amidships and lie down on top of the Pyotts biscuit tin. He egged on barking baboons and in the evenings growled at noises beyond the light of the fire. When he decided all was well, he would circle and lie in the crook of his master's legs. Gibbs likens Biltong to Mrs Chippy of Shackleton's Endurance expedition, but he reminds me more of Montmorency, the fox-terrier who accompanied Jerome K. Jerome and friends up the Thames in *Three men in a Boat (To say nothing of the Dog)* (1889). Montmorency chases every cat he sees, fights with every dog.

Jerome informs us that 'fox-terriers are born with about four times as much original sin in them as other dogs are.' Perhaps this rule applies not just to Foxies, but to terriers in general, for Biltong chased every sheep and goat he encountered. This habit, sadly, survived the river, and he had to be put down soon after Gibbs sailed for Oxford. 'He was so stupid and so wise,' wrote Needham from London, 'a genius among dogs.'

Near Petrusville, on a lively stretch of river that has since been drowned by the Vanderkloof dam, the three adventurers capsized. Their canoe was pinned against a rock and they couldn't move it, nor free any of their possessions. The rescue became an epic. A farm lorry failed to dislodge the boat, and the farmer's Jeep only succeeded on the third attempt. It took them nine days to repair the damage. Gibbs writes in a letter to his father that 'David was roped in to play rugger for Petrusville vs. Petrusberg. They played on gravel with a rocky reef running across the centre. Last week a man was killed on that field and yesterday a chap broke his arm.' I imagine the eighteen-year-old on the wing, schooled on the soft green fields of Bishops, longed for the relative safety of the river.

Needham and Gibbs slipped easily back into river life – they bagged duck with a 12-bore, baked them in clay, made ash bread, tarred their leaky boat. They shared their adventures with the people of the river, accepted meat and eggs in return, a carton of cigarettes, a box of cartridges. At Upington they took four days to rebitumise the bottom of their canoe. They made good progress past Augrabies, Onseepkans, Pella, but were bailing again by the time they reached Goodhouse. They ran rudimentary repairs, ate lots of oranges. The river became very shallow after Sendelingsdrif. They were forced, fifty kilometres from the mouth, to abandon the canoe at the high water mark and set off on foot. They reached the mouth 128 days after leaving the Mont-aux-Sources hotel: 'It became our river,' writes Gibbs,

fifty years on, 'a living experience of only four months but running through the rest of life.'

In 1958 the eighteen-year-old Willem van Riet paddled solo from Aliwal North to the Orange River mouth (his two companions dropped out after eight days). The river was uncharted territory in the 1950s. Van Riet thought he was the first person to paddle it – until an Upington farmer informed him that '*twee man en 'n hond hier verby is* - two men and a dog came past here.' Minimalist, dogless, paddling a fast Canadian, Van Riet reached the mouth in 39 days. '*My besittings is maar karig, een broek, sweetpakbaadjie en my slaapsak* - my possessions are meagre, one pair of pants, a tracksuit top and my sleeping bag.' I have already mentioned his loneliness: '*Niks kan die eensame aande langs die vuur uitwis nie* - nothing can erase those lonely nights by the fire, they are branded in my memory forever.'

I spoke to Van Riet before our trip. He is tall and powerful, self-assured. 'The Orange River turned my life around,' he said. 'It showed me that if one sticks to something, time will spit you out at the bottom.' After the Orange, Van Riet tackled the Pongola, the Limpopo, the Sabi and Kunene rivers. He describes his adventures in *Stroom af*

in my Kano (1966). The Kunene trip makes for compelling reading. Van Riet and Gordon Rowe paddled this remote river that marks Namibia's border with Angola in 1965. Hemmed in by the Baynes mountains, they were at the mercy of big water and voracious crocodiles. The reptiles pursued them across pools, forcing them to paddle hard for the safety of grade four rapids. Van Riet stood gun in hand at each stop.

They tried to hike out of the river, but the terrifying heat of the Namib drove them back. Eventually the steep walls flattened out, giving way to dunes. The two paddlers stumbled into an Angolan police post on the Skeleton Coast, utterly exhausted, not having eaten for days. In 1995 Van Riet returned to the Kunene on a rafting expedition. There appeared to be more crocodiles than ever – this despite the fact that SADF helicopters had used them for target practice in the 1980s. When one of the beasts ripped the bows off an inflatable raft, Van Riet realised just how lucky he was not to have died on the Kunene thirty years before.

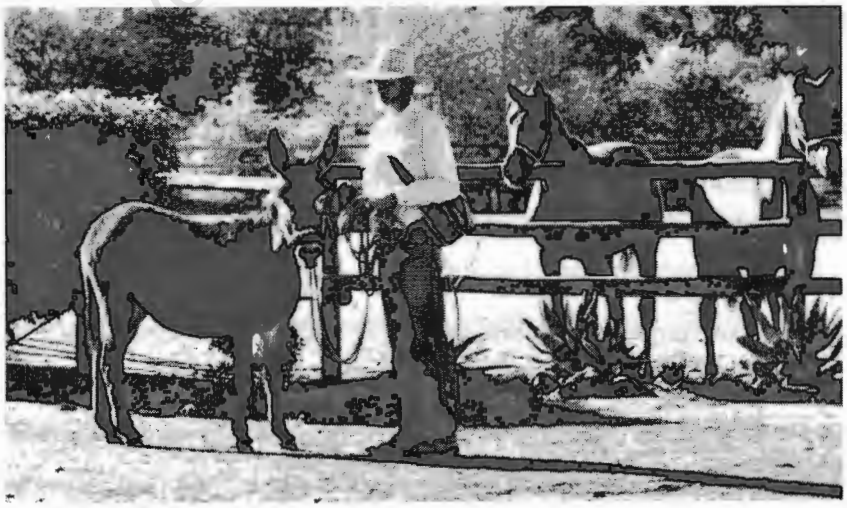
There have been many expeditions down the Orange in the forty-two years between Willem's trip and that of his son Louw. Only one, so far as I am aware, has paddled the full length of the river – that of Brian Lion-Cachet and his three companions in 1995. It is the less organised expeditions, though, the eccentric, even mad-dog, ventures that make for good stories. In the late 1960s Noël Ross and André Botha lost all their food a week before resupply. They fashioned a catapult from the rubber tubing in their splash decks, shot geese, collected rock pigeon eggs. In the early 1980s Brian van Zyl paddled the Orange twice, first from the Telle River on the Lesotho border, then solo from near the source of the Vaal. On reaching the Atlantic for the second time, he considered keeping going, paddling out into the breakers, turning left and following the coast. Four years later Van Zyl realised this crazy dream. He launched at Alexander Bay and paddled the entire South African coastline, a gruelling 3 600 kilometres to Kosi Bay. Another Orange adventurer chose to negotiate the coast first. I was on holiday with my family near Durban in the late 1970s. We were on the beach one day when a tall, sun-brown man in his early twenties came walking by. He was wearing a speedo, carrying a small knapsack on his back and a fishing rod in his hand. He told us he had come from Kosi Bay, that he was walking the South African coast.

Gavin Patterson reached Alexander Bay, then turned right and walked up the Orange as far as Vioolsdrif. A few years later Patterson was standing in the shallows under Zastron bridge near the Lesotho border. He was about to paddle the Orange on a surfboard. He placed his small pack in front of him and launched himself on an almost two thousand kilometre journey. That first day he burnt the soles of his feet so badly he couldn't walk. He appeared on television news at Hopetown bridge wearing half a leather soccer ball on his head. Patterson lived off the river, shooting ducks with a bow and arrow, chasing after baby Egyptian geese, catching barbel and catfish with a bundle of line.

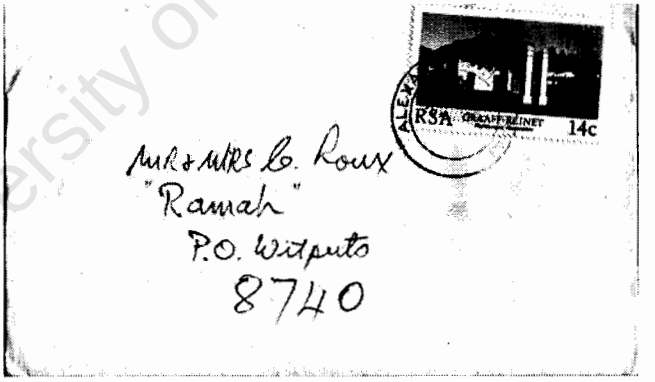
Soon after completing this epic journey, Patterson picked up a hitchhiker near Johannesburg. The seventeen-year-old Bowen Bowshier told Patterson that he and a friend were planning to paddle the Orange. 'Do it on your own,' urged Patterson. 'It's much more powerful that way. It'll make your balls heavy.' He offered to sponsor Bowshier's K1. The river was in flood when Bowshier put in at Zastron bridge. He dodged cows and pigs, nearly drowned three times in the first hour. He had a bad experience with quicksand and found the wasps that lived under the bridges so aggressive that he would capsize before a bridge, hear them thwack into his fibreglass hull as he drifted below their nest, then roll up again once the danger had passed. When the fish weren't biting and there were no birds to shoot, Bowshier followed telephone poles to farmhouses. After a few weeks on the river, his health started to suffer. There were days of delirium, the landscape swimming in colour. He finally blacked out near Pella. A farmer took him to Springbok where he was treated for heat stress. Back on the water he found he was still weak, and suffering from cramp. He spent a few days with a farm worker who was taking his annual leave under Vioolsdrif bridge, eating watermelon, drinking white wine, fishing. At Aussenkehr, Bowshier wandered inland. A farmer

found him passed out and packed him on a truck to Johannesburg. He was diagnosed with hepatitis, spent the next five weeks in hospital. 'It's absurd, really,' said Bowen, 'riding this big brown snake through vast, austere, inhospitable lands.' He fixed on me with his piercing eyes, unkempt beard. 'It's a very powerful place. At night be sure to walk away from the river. You'll hear the stars roar.'

Someone else whom I imagine hears the stars roar is Hugh Forsyth. In 1986 he and his donkey Jubly walked the length of the Orange, from the Lesotho border to the sea. As a child Forsyth had been inspired by Tschiffely's ride from Buenos Aires to Washington, ten thousand miles in the saddle. He always knew he would go on a long journey. Over the years Forsyth stashed things he would need, a sheath knife, a compass, a cookset. In his forty-third year, uneasy in Johannesburg despite moments of happiness, he knew it was time. 'I thought of the Orange because it has a beginning and an end, you walk with a purpose. Besides,' he said, his pale eyes studying me through glasses speckled with welding flak, 'I wanted space. There's a sweet melancholy in wide open space. I decided on a donkey as a pack would have been hard work, a supermarket trolley impractical.'



Chris Roux, who motored out to meet us in his inflatable boat on the first day of our trip, tells of a tall man in a straw hat and jeans appearing on his farm Ramah one day. His donkey wasn't laden with much, it seemed more company than anything else. Forsyth stayed the night, slept in a bed for the first time since Zastron. Jubly, in a paddock near the house, would bray furiously whenever she saw her owner, said Roux, sending his racehorses dilly. A week later the Rouxs received a letter thanking them for their hospitality. Forsyth wrote that he had stayed with a family who had given Jubly free rein of several acres of lucerne: 'Jubly in heaven – been frisky ever since, fat thing. Now lying peacefully next to me.' Forsyth and Jubly walked with drunks in the week, churchgoers on Sundays. Jubly took great delight in running down dongas and up the other side. 'I've been waiting for this moment my whole life,' Forsyth realised late one afternoon on the road down to Blouputs, 'and now it's happening.' Four months later the Rouxs received another letter in Forsyth's hand. It had been stamped in Alexander Bay. 'Five simply incredible months came to a sudden and sad end when Jubly died up in the mountains of the Richtersveld. We had moved into a winter rainfall area of amazing beauty, mountains, mists, remote shepherds, flowers and a vastness that can only be experienced and not described. We had several days of idyllic wandering and camping and were fairly close to a small settlement called Khubus when one day Jubly looked poorly. Within hours she was dead. Some sudden virus or poisonous plant is all I can think of. It was such a shock and



just awful. I won't burden you with the details, but I imagine you can guess how I felt. I had grown so very attached to that donkey.' Forsyth dreaded the prospect, he wrote, of having to adjust to real life again after months of talking to mayors and shepherds, and camping night after night along the river in goat tracks or under the stars in dry stream beds with dew falling on his face.

Nick and Danielle arrived at Provenance in the late afternoon. They were en route to northern Namibia, the Kaokoveld and the Skeleton Coast. 'Oh my God!' exclaimed Danielle as she climbed from the Landrover. 'Look at you guys! I hardly recognise you. You're so *woes*. And your bodies have changed. They're so hard and... focused.' She threw her arms around each of us, prodded, inspected. Laurence, she announced, looked like a Durban surfer with his strong torso and spindly legs. Chris was a beer truck. I was all sinew and definition, with the pronounced inguinal lines of John Frusciante in her Red Hot Chilli Peppers poster. While Danielle fluttered from one of us to the next, Nick unpacked the groceries we had asked him to buy in Springbok. 'What's this?' he demanded, adding his bags to our already burgeoning food pile. 'This isn't a river trip, it's a bloody holiday camp. All I take down a river is sugar and rice, with food colouring for variation.' He had a point. Between Provenance's storeroom, Noordoewer's shops, and the Springbok supplies, we now had olives, salami, Melrose cheese, peanut butter and peppadews, Bar One chocolate spread, achar, bread, Provita crispbread, a large bag of cereal mix, rice, cous cous, carrots, spaghetti, long-life custard, peach halves, guava halves, sweetcorn, beans, chakalaka, bully beef, smoked mussels, tomato and onion mix, mayonnaise, UHT milk, bacon, lamb chops, vacuum-packed T-bone steaks, whisky, olive oil, ginger, basil, curry powder, packet soup, soya mince, onions,

tomatoes, potatoes, *mieliepap*, sugar, tea, coffee, lemon cream and iced zoo biscuits, Liquorice Allsorts, four kilograms of peanuts and raisins, biltong, *droëwors* - dried sausage, dried fruit, mangos, bananas, oranges, cooldrink powder, and chocolate. And we were only six days from the coast. While Willem van Riet and his *karige besittings* - meagre possessions inspired us, ours was no minimalist trip. We had with us a GPS and eleven maps, three cameras, a pile of notebooks and several novels. Christopher travelled lightest, citing Chaucer's bag of needments. He never left home, he said, with more than he could carry at a sprint. Laurence brought the lot – a walkman, a pile of casette tapes, binoculars, a tin of beads to make necklaces. 'Little luxuries make a big difference,' he said, when I questioned his shopping in Upington. 'At the end of a hard day, whisky and biltong bring us together.' He was right. A diet of rice with blue food colouring would have been cheaper, lighter, infinitely harder, but we wouldn't have lasted a week.

We woke before dawn, wished Nick and Danielle well for their travels, gobbled down some *mieliepap*. The light, delicate as crystal at first, deepened to dawn-red on the cliffs opposite Peace of Paradise camp. 'This feels so right,' said Chris, 'I could do it forever.' River life had become normal existence. I put down my paddle, rested my hands on the flanks of the kayak as naturally as if they were my own thighs. I thought of Huckleberry Finn, of his pronouncement, at some stage in his adventures, that it was so good to be 'free again and all by ourselves on the big river and nobody to bother us.' His expansiveness, his sheer huckleberry-ness, as he rolled down the Mississippi, its mile-wide tide. 'Other places do feel so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.'

Mountain closed in on us. We turned north, and entered upon the violence of the Richtersveld – pitiless rock and fierce close sun, craggy peaks, barrenness, utter desolation. We were arrested by the quality of the light. With little vapour in the air, the sun burns close and clean and pure, affording the Richtersveld an unaccustomed brightness, a dazzling array of colour. The basalt, dolerite and decomposing granite, the tillite, the sandstone, shale, shist and quartz, vary in colour from black, blue, brown and red, through brick and ochre, delicate lilacs and pinks, to any number of combinations: blue-black, grey-brown, a whitish orange. The stark beauty of this rugged mountain desert has one reaching for too many words, or none at all. Any combination of angry, harsh, violent and cruel, arid, desiccated, lunar or bare, tangled, twisted, torn, split and chiselled, any combination of these words gives one some sense of Mount Terror, Gorgon's Head, or Dragon's Back Mountain. Deneys Reitz flew over

the Richtersveld during the flood of 1934. He described it as 'the most jagged country I have seen in my life – serrated mountains that stood up like sharks' teeth.' I too had flown over the Richtersveld. I joined my friend Craig,

accumulating hours for his pilot's licence, on a flight along the Orange from Kimberley to Alexander Bay and back. It was as if we were orbiting the moon. Bands of bare twisted rock clung to the banks of the river, isolating it from the plains, grey and lifeless, over which the shadow of our plane now passed like cross-hairs in search of a rebel base. And then, without warning, we were over the Richtersveld – a tangle of jagged peaks and a river running through them.

'Just look at these peaks,' said Laurence as we rounded a dark spur. 'They remind me of this thing David Attenborough says in Williamson's book. He calls the Richtersveld a landscape without soil, it's bones naked to the sun.'

Laurence was referring to Graham Williamson's *Richtersveld: the Enchanted Wilderness* (2000). I had read Attenborough's foreword. He starts with these words so as to set up the startling contrast of the Richtersveld – seemingly incapable of life and yet, botanically, the most species-rich desert in the world. Much of the Richtersveld receives less than 100 mm of rainfall per annum (purists consider it South Africa's only true desert), and yet it has a unique flora, exquisitely adapted to this harsh climate. Naturalists like Attenborough come for the high incidence of endemic species, and for the diversity of succulents – from the conophyta, smaller than fingernails, through the *vygies* - mesembs and euphorbia, to the signature plants of the Richtersveld: the *halfmens*, the *kokerboom*, and its rare relative, the endemic *basterkokerboom*. (I suppose it's consistent, at least, that the appellation baster, used to describe humans not quite as white as the settlers, should be attached to an aloe not quite as broad as the *kokerboom*.)

Such rich fuel was Bjørn's *mieliepap* that we decided to press on, roll tea and lunch into one. I considered the riverscape before me. What was it about these mountains, this river? What gave them this, well, exultant quality? The startling contrast between the wetness of

water and the stoniness of stone, yes, but why did I find this so compelling? Was it the suddenness of the transition? A metre off the water you are already in desert. A few steps further and the onslaught of rock and hammering sun so overwhelms you, you can hardly conceive of water any more, you begin to doubt the Orange's ability to wet you. Perhaps that's where the magic of the Richtersveld resides, in the steep gradient between water and stone, in the tension it creates.

Laurence and Chris, some distance ahead of me, were passing by a stretch of grass on the right bank. 'Lunch!... lunch!... lunch!... lunch!... lunch!' I shouted. The frantic call of the lunch-warbler, they dubbed it. We pulled our boats onto the grass and settled down to the task of getting through our supply of food. A figure appeared from the reeds. He was seated on the inflated inner tube of a tractor tyre, propelling himself with a damaged aluminium and plastic paddle, probably a commercial discard. When he drew level with us, he pointed to his mouth and stomach then pulled up his nets, indicated they were empty. Dabis was telling us he was hungry. He was tall, very dark, with a gentle way about him, a Robben Island Museum cap on his head. He understood neither English nor Afrikaans, which suggests he was Namibian. The fact that we encountered him on the Namibian bank is immaterial, the border being of little consequence to the people of the river. Dabis ate moderately; he seemed amused by our appetites. Chris sat down next to him, held the waterproof camera at arm's length, photographed the two of them. Dabis reached for the camera, got Chris to show him how it worked. He snapped away at us, our antics and silly faces. The fisherman was enjoying himself, smiling more broadly behind the lens than we were in front of it. We positioned him mid-current on his tube, and paddled past. The resultant photograph, the only one we have of the three of us together on the water, is surprisingly good.

Ahead of us was a conical hill, and halfway up it the abandoned fluorspar mine favoured by commercial operators. On each of my previous trips down this section of river, twice as a client, once as an assistant guide, I had walked up to the mine. Typically, guides gather their clients together at the beam that marks the entrance to the shaft and tell of the early prospectors, their search for copper and diamonds and gold, their hard lives. The river hooked left and whooshed us through the much-talked-about Sjambok rapid – which proved strangely innocuous at this water level. We boomed on down a narrow channel through dark dolerite sills, brown mountains to our left, purple to the right. An hour later, possibly more, we noticed a white R painted on a rock. This, Bjørn had told us, marks the start of the Richtersveld National Park, 1 600 square kilometres of rugged mountain and fragile plants bounded north and east by the Orange. The National Parks Board set about establishing a park in the Richtersveld in the 1980s. Their plan to deport local Nama herders in the interests of conservation prompted one Nama to observe: '*Hulle gee om vir die halfmens, maar wat van die volle mens* - they care for the half-person

[plant], but what about the full person?' The Nama obtained a Supreme Court interdict to block the proposed park. Negotiations followed. In a victory for community-based conservation, the Nama and the Parks Board signed a cooperative agreement in 1991. The Richtersvelders now lease the land to the Parks Board. They have a say in management decisions and are allowed to graze their stock within park boundaries.

Before long we encountered the fruits of this agreement. Hundreds of goats were trailing out of the dusty Ga-ams River valley down to the Orange for a drink. So this is what the Ga-ams looks like, I thought. Somewhere in Williamson's book he tells of a botanist who asks a shepherd the way to the Ga-ams River. The shepherd replies: '*Daar's net een rivier, die Grootrivier* - there's only one river, the Great River.' We paddled past the Witches, a series of peaks that culminates in the looming presence of Gorgon's Head. Bjørn had advised us to camp a few kilometres below Gorgon if we wished to see the rare cactus-like *halfmens*, to climb the valley on the left bank. We angled across a rapid into the shallows, hauled our boats up the bank, grabbed shoes, cameras, waterbottles. Our walk soon became a scramble over black gneiss ribbed with translucent quartz. The gneiss gave way to loose shale and a scorpion. We reached a saddle – and the glare, once more, of the afternoon sun. I felt the sweat stiffen on my back. Laurence spotted a *kokerboom* - quiver tree some forty yards below us. We had seen *kokerboom* forests at Boegoeberg and Onseepkans, and the odd lone aloe, like a sentinel, downstream of Goodhouse, but we hadn't yet inspected one close-up. I ran my hand over its tough, pliable bark. There are said to be *kokers* over two thousand years old, plants that have forgotten how to die. In Trinity College, Dublin, there is a sketch of a *kokerboom* by a certain Claudius who accompanied Simon van der Stel to *de Kopere Bergh* - the copper mountains in 1685. 'The branches of this tree,' reads the inscription,

'are used by the natives as quivers for their arrows. They hollow them out and cover one end with a piece of leather.' It was the San, mostly, who made quivers. The Nama hollow out the stems, use them as fridges, sometimes even coffins. I can't shake the idea, though, that these ancient plants would be best employed on the cover of U2's *Joshua Tree*, or some such desert music.

We returned to the saddle and battled on up a white scree slope to the colony of *halfmens* near the summit. They did seem half human, these thick spiny stems rising five to six feet out of the stony rubble, their heads inclined gently to the north. The Nama have a legend concerning the *halfmens*, or *!khureb*. Warring San drove their ancestors south into this mountain desert. Some of the Nama gazed back longingly to the north. God turned them into *halfmense* - half people, looking forever towards their homeland. Science, of course, also has a story. *Pachypodium namaquanum* avoids growing in the stressful summer months. This tactic has a drawback, though – the winter sun follows a low arc in the sky and days are short. The upper portion of the plant thus bends to the north to double the amount of light falling on its crown of leaves.

We continued up to the summit, looked over the back. Down below us the baked-brown expanse of Springbokvlakte fanned out towards the thin green line of the Orange – and beyond it the broader, paler green of vineyard and Aussenkehr farm. The overwhelming impression from our lookout, though, was one of mountain. To the north of Springbokvlakte, and wrapping around to the west and the south, were range upon range of peaks, saw-toothed, solemn, receding one behind the other, the purples fading to blues and distant greys. I had a sense of the *halfmens* plants keeping a vigil over this ancient land.

Chris and Laurence lured me from my sleeping bag with coffee. I sat down at the edge of our waterway, still half asleep, lulled by indigo skies and the gentle thunder of rapid. We breakfasted on mango, *mieliepap*, bacon and beans, then paddled off into the morning sun, heading east for the first time on our journey. The river was flat, broad, featureless. We tapped on to Aussenkehr, a farm on the Namibian bank. I say a farm – at over a thousand square kilometres Aussenkehr is the biggest farm in the southern hemisphere. Deposits of alluvial soil from the Orange enrich its brackish slate ground for fifty kilometres, from Sambok to Gamkab. Aussenkehr is owned by Dusan Vasiljevic, a South African who leases out portions of the farm to various consortia. In the early 1990s he replaced mixed farming – oranges, tomatoes, lucerne – with a thousand hectares of table

grapes. A row of flags acknowledges his foreign capital – Germany, England, China, the Czech Republic. Vasiljevic has stolen a march on the growers upstream at Kakamas, Blouputs, Southern Farms – his grapes are the earliest in southern Africa.

Lawrence Green, never the most reliable source, reports that Aussenkehr was established by two brothers named Petersen, owners of the Crocodile Hotel in Liverpool. As one of the brothers was consumptive, they moved to the dry climate of German South West Africa in 1887. They hauled a steam engine by ox-wagon from Port Nolloth to the banks of the Orange, and for ten years produced fruit and vegetables. Another source reports that Petersen was German, and that he established Aussenkehr for a Berlin-based syndicate in 1883. Either way, A. D. Lewis, walking the lower reaches of the Orange in 1912, encountered the ruins of an early irrigation scheme at Aussenkehr. Forty years later Peter Gibbs and David Needham, on their pioneering voyage down the river, were welcomed at Aussenkehr by a German couple named Reck. The farm had been abandoned, reports Gibbs, from the early years of the century until the Recks had settled there a few years before. 'They had a three year old son,' writes Gibbs in his memoirs, 'and by one of those wonderful fates of chance my letter 46 years later, sent thanking them for their hospitality, was forwarded to their son, Karl Reck at Beauvallon near Alexander Bay.' Karl Reck replied to Gibbs's letter, telling him that his parents had passed away in 1980/1. He included a copy of his book *Tracks and Trails of the Richtersveld* (1994). In his introduction Reck speaks of his obsession to find out what it was that had lured so many prospectors to the Richtersveld. He decided to record the routes they had taken, the relics of their activities. Many of the old routes, well-used during the days of prospecting and farming, were badly eroded, and Reck was forced to negotiate several thousand tortuous miles by motorbike. He mapped ninety-five tracks in all. His book is a treasure

trove of mine shafts, copper works, prospects with names like Aguraab and Billingham's, sorting dams, stone kraals, sinkholes, pools, petroglyphs, and hidden valleys. He recounts the hardships endured by the pioneering white families, Avenant, Graaff, Van Zyl, before they were forced out by the nationalist government in 1959, and the ongoing battle waged against the terrain by coloured families, Basson, Smith, Farmer. His photographs throw a lifeline to unpretty people going about their lives, to structures long collapsed. Reck's motorbike, surely scrapped by now, is still parked, in his book, on a gravel track overlooking the dusty course of the Xaminxaip River.

There were several signs of human presence over the next few kilometres, most glaringly the rubble hill of the diamond mine at Grasdrif (within the bounds, bizarrely, of a national park) and the compound for Aussenkehr's eight-thousand-strong labour force. We entered mountain again. And were just settling back into wilderness – water, stone, sky – when we rounded a corner to a splash of pink, yellow and red. A K1 and several K2 kayaks were pulled up on the bank. We could see their occupants huddled on the rocks opposite Gamkab rapid, scouting no doubt. I checked our map. Someone had scrawled the words 'left of centre'. We bounced through the entry rapids, veered to the left of a large rock, took the V-shaped tongue over the lip and punched through the stopper at the bottom, then eddied out to chat to the party on the bank. Regulation stuff after a month on the water.

A man in his forties, big, boy-scoutish, walked over to us. Behind him were girls, lots of them, all in their late teens it seemed, long hair, soft skin, bright flashing eyes as they talked and laughed or nervously contemplated the roar of Gamkab. André explained that Sonja, a friend's daughter, had just finished school. She had asked him to guide her and her friends down the Orange, from Aussenkehr to the Fish River, maybe further. Some girls drifted over. 'Hello,' said one of them, 'I'm Sonja. This is Marene, Liza, Nikki.' They were gorgeous – impish and playful, innocent as apples. We talked of leaving school, the euphoria, the doubts, of our trip down the river, and theirs. André asked whether we would wait below the rapid, rescue swimmers, catch paddles and boats. The next half hour was carnage: capsized boats, bobbing helmets, waterbags floating off downstream. All but one of the seven K2s capsized in Gamkab. Laurence and Chris tossed throwlines to swimmers, dragged them and their boats ashore. I stayed in my kayak and intercepted paddles, possessions, swimmers who had slipped through the net. The river was flowing strongly – one boat, full of water, took me half a kilometre to land. The black rocks below Gamkab were strewn with lifejackets, waterbottles and shoes, exhausted bodies. I joined Laurence and Chris, who were repacking their throwlines in the shallows.

'There's no way André could have managed this on his own,' said Laurence.

'Let's slow down,' said Chris, 'help him for a day or two. Goodness knows we've enough food.' We smiled at this little dig. Chris, the minimalist, was still aghast at the excesses of our last shop.

We approached André with our offer. He was delighted. His *handlanger* - assistant had pulled out a day before the trip. 'I should really have cancelled, but the girls were so despondent. We figured we'd muck along.' When several boats had tipped on flat water near Aussenkehr, André knew he was in for a torrid time at the rapids –

Gamkab, Thunderbolt, Surprise, De Hoop. 'These K2s are fast, great for flat stretches and headwinds, but they're helluva unstable. And only two of the girls have ever paddled before.'

The hours that followed were the most enchanted of our trip. The tinkle of girls' voices, their softness and mystery. The snippets of conversation that floated across the water as they reviewed their young lives: 'Remember the night you broke the chair at Bianca's house?'; 'Nonsense, I saw you kiss him at the old harbour!' One little flotilla was speaking German, each reciting a list in turn. Some words I recognised: mascara, tampons, *Schokolade*. And then they burst into song: '*Ein Lied, zwo drei vier, Fröhlichkeit!, aus* - a song, two three four, Happiness!, stop.' Their ditty rose to a crescendo of joy, then stopped dead. They sang it over and over, each *Fröhlichkeit!* more joyful than the last, each *aus* more haunting. The world was filled with wonder again. We remembered how to smile. For weeks our jaws had been cast in grim determination; we had for weeks, I realised, like Lawrence in Arabia, been living in 'the stretch and sag of nerves.' We splashed other boats and started mudfights, stopped to swim and took a long lunch, found the time at last to lie down in the shade of a tamarisk with our books.

At rapids we shepherded our charges like ducklings, sent them down boat by boat, picked up the pieces below. Some of the girls learned to

brace – come Thunderbolt, three crews stayed dry. We set up camp above Surprise rapid, at the edge of a shallow inlet protected from the main current. Chris, André and I sat on a rocky ledge, sipped beer with our feet in the water. We watched Laurence wade across to Surprise with his lifejacket secured about his midriff like a nappy. He leapt into the headwaters of the rapid and bobbed through the wave train, facing back upstream, taking sips from his beer as successive waves gently slapped the back of his head. I slipped off the ledge and made for the far end of the inlet. Halfway there I passed a circle of girls, Nikki, Tanya, Rebecca, a few others silhouetted against the setting sun. They were kneeling in the shallows, talking, laughing, washing their hair. The glint of the sun off wet skin, their arms above their heads, their breasts lifting from the water, gathering soap. I thought of the words a friend had pinned above my desk in Cape Town (D.H. Lawrence, I think): 'There is no god apart from poppies and the flying fish, men singing songs and women washing their hair in the sun.'

Chris and I lay on our backs observing the gradations of colour as day turned to night. The first stars were beginning to appear. There's such an overwhelming sense of wilderness out here, I thought to myself, the river, these mountains, all this wide-open sky. I'm forever talking of aridity, when perhaps it's wilderness I'm after. Perhaps the aridity's only an accidental by-product. I decided to isolate this problem, approach it logically. How did I feel about non-arid wilderness? Jungle, for instance. I had recently watched a slideshow on the Amazon. It was beautiful, certainly, bright birds, great muddy rivers, trees that supported entire ecosystems. I felt claustraphobic, though, breathed more easily only when our guide climbed to a platform up above the canopy. Thinking back to that slideshow, I realised that I would get spiritual toe-jam in the jungle. I needed the simplicity of desert landscape, the vast open spaces, the

nothingness. But why? Why should nothingness mesmerise me? I considered Scully and Weidner and A. A. Anderson. What had drawn them to the dry places of the earth? The clean air, the clear light, the primeval silence. The seductive contrast, no doubt, between these delicate things and the vicious heat. The brooding majesty of the landscape, the hardiness of the plants and animals, the scarcity of humans, the miracle of dripping water. And the cumulative effect of all these things: that sense of immutable peace one gets in the desert. A peace that comes, I think, from finding one's inner markers. The desert is bound to reveal your true needs. There's nowhere to hide – just you and sand and stone and sky.

I bounced some of these ideas off Chris.

'Deserts certainly had a liberating effect on the prophets of old,' he said. 'In your case, though, it could be something entirely different.'

'What?'

'Perhaps you're just isolated, and so seek out places to justify your isolation.' I swiped at him with a rolled up sleeping mat, but he was ready for me. The sky was a deep blue now, the stars crisp and urgent, Orion, Scorpio, the Southern Cross, Betelgeuse.

'The western half of southern Africa,' mused Chris, 'from just north of Cape Town right up to the Kunene, it's one big unrealised resource. The way the world's accelerating, people will come to crave these assets, the clean air, the uninhabited space. We should get them up here, have them sit for long hours doing nothing. And then, when they've gained some sense of their tininess, we whisk them off to the banks of the Orange, invite them to see this river flowing through parched lands as a metaphor for their own abundance.'

I considered the enigmatic triangle of stars known as the Seven Sisters. As usual, I could find only six of them. I envied Chris his enthusiasm, but I could think of few things worse than peopling the Richtersveld. Let them stay in the cities, those tough enough for

concrete and steel, for the jostle and the bustle, the neon and the lethal vodka-redbulls. Those who feel the pull of solitude will find their way out here soon enough. I thought of Fred Cornell, the author-prospector with a love of wild places in his bones, of the years he spent between Upington and the Orange River mouth with 'sand for a couch and stars for a ceiling.' He was always going to find his way out of the city. Cornell records his adventures in *The Glamour of Prospecting* (1920). This title has always conjured up for me the image of miners in pink feather boas. One gets a better sense of the book from its subtitle: *wanderings of a South African prospector in search of copper, gold, emeralds and diamonds*. It is an often heartbreaking read, a litany of hardship, near-misses and failures: '...four months later, ragged, footsore, broken in health and practically penniless, we tramped back into Prieska having searched the south bank of the river for nearly three hundred miles without having found a single diamond'; 'I was literally in rags, and with barely enough of my veldtschoen uppers left to hold together the blood-stained rags on my feet'; '...and altogether the trip was one long disaster'; 'And so we had come nearly a thousand miles... for nothing, simply upon another wild-goose chase!' Cornell's travails were not for nothing. They produced a book that has proved more lastingly valuable than the riches he missed out on. Tim Couzens, in 'North of Bitterfontein, West of Hotazel,' a delightful review of northern Cape literature, considers *The Glamour of Prospecting* and Scully's *Lodges in the Wilderness* the classics of the region. Couzens, incidentally, wrote the introduction to the 1986 edition of *Glamour*. He opens with the immortal sentence: 'There are few connoisseurs of the desert.' And then, of course, accords that privilege to Cornell.

In 1910 Cornell approached the Richtersveld. He was on horseback, accompanied by an ox-wagon carrying his precious barrels of water. 'I sat on the waggon box and looked at that distant line of

blue peaks and wanted those mountains bad!' A few days later he was in the thick of them, at the summit of Helskloof: '...the western sky was still ablaze, and silhouetted against it were innumerable peaks of every shade of mauve and violet grading into deepest purple. It was magnificent, and I sat down on a rock and gazed and gazed.' Cornell was the first person to describe the Richtersveld in detail, and the romantic bent of his prose did much to establish its allure: 'These queer peaks were stark and bare and of the most startling colours. In serrated lines they stretched out like the teeth of a saw, and their crumbling slopes of rotten schist were of every shade of red, of brick-red, of flaring vermilion, of bright orange-red, in fact of every red-hot gradation of colour.' Cornell washed glacial gravels at Sendelingsdrif, today the site of Reuning diamond mine. So promising were the indicators that he worked for weeks on end, from first light to last. And yet somehow he missed the diamonds. Or did he? In 1921 Cornell sailed for London, both to cash in on the enthusiastic reception of *Glamour*, and to raise money for further exploration along the lower reaches of the Orange. Perhaps he took a packet of diamonds along to entice future backers. We will never know. Cornell was travelling through Knightsbridge in the side-car of a motorcycle when he was hit by a taxi and died.

A sentence from Cornell's obituary perhaps sums him up best: 'His was essentially the prospector spirit: ever he sought to discover the "something beyond the ranges" which lures the senses and draws the traveller on.' He was an incurable romantic, forever responding to Kipling's call: 'Something hid behind the ranges! Go and look behind the ranges!' The search – be it for diamonds, or gold, or god – was always more important to him than the prize. The title of his book tells us this, and the opening sequence confirms it: 'Certainly I have no love for the cut and finished article... but for the rough stone, and the rough life entailed in searching for it, I have always had a passion.' And so

the rough life he got, blazing a trail with his pick and his hammer, opening up the wild places of the earth for the benefit of those who would follow.

Surprise rapid, unsurprisingly, collected its toll. There was no damage to bones or boats, though, and we were soon on our way again. Baby otters cavorted downstream of us; a yellowfish, hopelessly too big for them, leapt from the water. Wasps floated on the surface for a drink; barbel sucked at the surface foam. As the cool of morning gradually baked away, we saw egrets, weavers, a pied kingfisher. I heard the *piet-my-vrou* call of the redchested cuckoo, our first of the trip. It reminded me of Strathbreede, the farm of my childhood. Two fish eagles flew out from the trees twenty yards ahead of us, so close we could see the yellow of their beaks. The girls' ecstatic reactions reminded me how magnificent these birds are. It's easy to forget on the river – we'd been seeing fish eagles about as often as a Capetonian sees a red Citi Golf. 'Ba-hoh!' Baboons up ahead. Chris motioned for us to drift on in silence. As we neared the end of our reeded channel, dense and musty, he let out a barbaric 'Bah-ho!' of his own. There was a crunch of reeds followed by splashes as three baboons leapt into the water. We emerged from the channel to see them making for the far bank, hunch-backed, looking back nervously over their shoulders as they crabbed across the current.

'*Zulibambe linga tshoni, zulibambe linga tshoni, zulibambe linga tshoni, ilanga.*' Ntshiuoa was singing again. It wouldn't be long before she had the entire group joining in, harmonising. I paddled over to her boat, asked what the words meant. 'Hold it so it doesn't go down,' she said, 'hold it so it doesn't go down, the sun.'

'Tell him where it's from,' said Mimi.

'Mandela and his fellow prisoners sang these words, endlessly. It kept their spirits up as they broke stones on Robben Island. Nice story, hey?'

'Nice song.'

And then we were treated to a canon in four languages: '*Vader Jakob, Vader Jakob / Dormez vous, dormez vous? / Hörst du nicht die Glocken, hörst du nicht die Glocken? / khele ke nce, khele ke nce.*' Afrikaans, French, German, Xhosa – 'Are you sleeping, Brother John, wedding bells are ringing, ding dong ding.' For the rest of the morning the girls row-row-rowed their boats merrily to the shore; Michael, too, rowed his boat ashore; and a kookaburra sat in an old gum tree. We scorched ourselves ankle-deep in hot sand as we hauled our boats from the water at lunch and made for the shade of an *Acacia karroo*. This lone tree stood guard over a patch of baked earth at the foot of an orange-brown scree slope ridged with dark jagged outcrops. Downstream of us, said André, were the De Hoop ruins. Laurence and I gobbled down some food – viennas and beetroot, sweaty cheese on bread – and ventured out into the pulsing heat. At the top of a low rise overlooking the river we found a stone floor. There were bricks at the corners, two to three rows deep. Paul and Daisy Avenant lived here for thirty years, raised cattle, sheep and goats, eleven children. Peter Gibbs, in 1953, found the Avenant home 'the simplest and perhaps most isolated of all the homes we passed on the river.' Each winter, when the rains turned the veld inland to pasture, the Avenants trekked to De Koei waterhole. Paul Avenant occasionally travelled a hundred and twenty miles

across the stony tracks of the Richtersveld to Port Nolloth. Daisy would stay behind to tend the livestock, chase off leopards, or *tiere*, as she called them, tigers.

As Laurence and I moved around the ruins, it seemed to me that the Avenants' abandoned home had been flattened, quite simply, by the hammering of the sun. De Hoop is a hard place to carve out a life for oneself, an unrelenting war against the elements. Perhaps apartheid did the Avenants a favour. In 1959 the nationalist government forced them out of the Richtersveld, along with all the other white squatters, the Viljoens and Van Rensburgs, the Van Zyls, the Graaffs. The Richtersveld was a coloured reserve, and it would make a mockery of the Group Areas Act, after all, if the whites were allowed to stay. Some families changed their classification to coloured and remained on the land.

Only three K2s capsized in De Hoop rapid, but Sonja and Svenja managed to wrap theirs around a rock. The two ends of the fibreglass boat almost touched. Laurence needed forty-five minutes, he said, to repair the damage. As he and Chris cut away the rough edges and smoothed the glass with sandpaper, I slipped off. I had spotted goats on an island downstream; perhaps their herder would speak to me. I beached in front of the astonishing spectacle of two goats up a tree, five foot off the ground, grazing on the branch of a gnarled old tamarisk, several others on their hind legs straining to reach the canopy. A man emerged from a makeshift shelter in the reeds, walked over with his whippet-like dog, all teats and ribs, tail tucked firmly between its legs.

'*Middag*,' he nodded, 'Faans Cloete.'

'William Dicey,' I said, pushing back my hat. Faans, though slim, was tall, broader in the shoulder than other Namas I had met. I told him so.

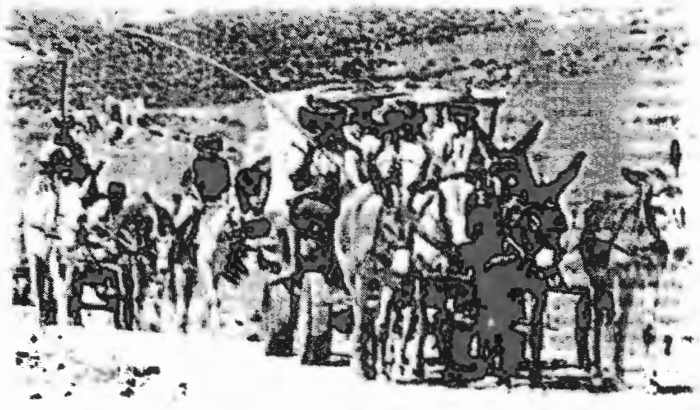
'*Oo nee*,' he laughed, '*ek's nie 'n Hotnot nie, ek's 'n opregte Baster, 'n Bosluisbaster* – oh no, I'm not Khoi, I'm a genuine Baster, a Bosluisbaster.' Faans launched into the story of his people's trek from Bushmanland to the Richtersveld in 1949. I frantically scribbled notes around the perimeter of our Richtersveld map. '*Nee mannetjie*,' he said, '*jy moenie my woorde neerskryfie* - you mustn't write down my words.' Faans explained that a year back the Bosluisbasters had celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their exodus, as they call it. They had recorded the *grootmense* - old people's memories of the event. Faans asked for my address, said he would get the community officer to send me a copy of the CD they had cut. An audio cassette was waiting for me in Cape Town when I got back from the river. On the casette Oom Org Farmer, the Bosluisbasters' 77-year-old *lewende museum* - living museum, tells the story of his people. '*Die Namakwaland was 'n kleurling land gewees, die Namakwaland*,' he opens in an earthy, nasal voice, a smiling voice, a voice without teeth, 'Namaqualand was a coloured land.' His parents roamed Bushmanland with their sheep and goats, they read and sang, like the *trekboers*, from their *Nederlandse Bybel* - Dutch Bible. When the last Crown Lands were surveyed and sold off to the highest bidder in the 1920s, the Basters became labourers, trekking from farm to farm, working for white farmers in return for grazing rights. '*Daai tyd in die Boesmanland was daar net twee werke gewees. As jy nie 'n boer is wat kan self klaar kom nie, dan onder 'n ander ene moet jy veë oppas óf daar is soutpanne, jy moet nou sout ry* - at that time in Bushmanland there were only two types of work. If you weren't a farmer who could get by on your own, then you had to herd stock for another, or there were salt pans, you had to transport salt.' The few Basters that did manage to buy land were soon squeezed out by their white neighbours. They were fenced in, denied access to *trekpaaie* - routes to winter grazing. Their stock died and they sold cheap. By the late

1920s a large number of destitute Basters were wandering the plains of Bushmanland. Their plight came to the attention of the Reverend Pieter Eksteen of Pofadder. He arranged for a farmer named Meyer, a white man married to a coloured woman, to give the Basters a piece of ground on his farm Bosluis, south-west of Pofadder, so that they might build a church. Oom Org explains: '*Inlik, die naam van daai plaas is Boonste Sluis, verstaan jy, toe is hy sommer plat afgesê Bosluis ...en ons is Basters, jy's nou nie 'n Hotnot nie, jy's ook nie 'n witman nie, jy's 'n Baster, daarom sê ons Bosluisbasters* - actually, the name of that farm is Boonste Sluis, you understand, which was shortened to Bosluis... and we're Basters, you're not a Hotnot, you're not a white man, you're a Baster, so we say Bosluisbaster.' Oom Org's people are named for an upper sluice, *bo-sluis*, and not, as is sometimes thought, for a tick, *bos-luis*.

In 1929 the Bosluisbasters built a corrugated iron church on Meyer's land. They held *nagmaal* - communion every six months. People travelled for days to attend: '*donkie kar, fiets, vanuit Springbok, Loeriesfontein, Kliprant, so het ons bymekaar gekom* - donkey cart, bicycle, from Springbok, Loeriesfontein, Kliprant, that's how we came together.' By the 1940s the Bosluis congregation had swelled and Eksteen started looking around for a permanent home. He petitioned the government. They offered the Basters a piece of land around a spring called Stinkfontein in the southern Richtersveld. ''*n Plek is beskikbaar, ons kan verhuis, dis al wat ons geweet het* - a place is available, we can move, that's all we knew.' Uncertain, frightened, the Bosluisbasters decided to trek. Several families were broken up. '*In 'aai selde tyd*,' relates Oom Org, '*het die wet ingekom dat jy nou moes geklassifiseer word blank of gekleurd of wat jy ook al is* - at that time the law came in that you had to be classified white or coloured or whatever you were.' Meyer, the owner of Bosluis farm, faced a dilemma. If he wished to keep his farm, he would have to remain

white. If he wished to travel with his children to the Richtersveld, however, '*dan moet hy afstand doen van sy blankeskap en kleurling word* - then he would have to distance himself from his whiteness and become coloured.' Meyer chose to become coloured. '*Maar wat dit baie traumaties gemaak het* - but what made it very traumatic was that the separation ripped his family apart, because the whites were white and you weren't allowed to come to them and they weren't allowed to come to you, and... and... it's a heartbreaking story.'

In March 1949 the Bosluisbasters trekked west across Bushmanland, wagons and donkey carts, sheep and cattle, clanging coffee pots and screaming infants. '*Ons het kwaai blankes gekry, kwaai kwaai boere* - we encountered fierce whites, fierce fierce farmers.' These farmers either demanded the Basters' best ewes as toll, or forced them to turn around with observations like: '*Ons het besluit die klas man wat jy is moet op die pad sterwe* - we have decided that your class of man must die on the road.' Each morning, reports Oom Org, the woman had to put a little meat on the fire, if there was a little meat, and she had to spread the childrens' bread and make coffee, while the man milked the goats and gave the lambs water, and went off to find the donkies and harness them, packed the wagon, caught the children and the chickens, drank his coffee '*en dan loop die wa weer* - and then the wagon moves again.' The three hundred kilometre trek from Bosluis to Stinkfontein, zigzagging from pasture to waterhole, took the Bosluisbasters a month. The



early years at Stinkfontein were a struggle: '*Ooo, dis 'n harde wêreld. Dit kos maar genade om hier 'n bestaan te maak* - this is a hard world. One needs mercy to make a living.' But while life was tough for the Cloetes and the Volmoers (later Farmers), the Owies and the Groenewalds, at least they were now their own bosses. When a white farmer wanted to graze his sheep on their land '*in plaas van outa sê,*' laughs Oom Org, 'instead of saying *outa* [old coloured man], he now had to come and say mister.' The Bosluisbasters fetched their corrugated church with a lorry, converted it into a school. As their settlement gradually took shape, they named it Eksteenfontein in honour of their priest. Today Eksteenfontein comprises a few dozen homes built from cement blocks, two churches, two shops, a bottle store, a community hall, a part-time police station. The Bosluisbasters have come to love their new home: '*Die Richtersveld, hier kan jy weer jou self wees, of jou self word* - here you can be yourself again, or become yourself. You feel very close to your Maker. You can hear the silence here in the Richtersveld, you can tell the difference between something and nothing.'

I only heard Oom Org Farmer's account of the Bosluisbaster exodus a few weeks later. But Faans Cloete, down on his haunches in amongst his goats on the island below De Hoop rapid, captured the gist of it for me. Why had I not heard this story before, I wondered, a story full of the tragedy of South Africa's obsession with race? I had read the chapter on the history and people of the Richtersveld in Williamson's book. He deals with explorers and missionaries, botanists known only to a tight academic circle, Drège, Zeyher, Schlechter. He includes the story of the diamond rush in the 1920s and a picturesque account of the Nama – 'survivors from an ancient past.' Not once, though, does he mention the Bosluisbasters, a community that has lived in the Richtersveld for fifty years. Perhaps I shouldn't have been too surprised. I remember reading Eve Palmer's

The Plains of Camdeboo (1966), a classic of the South African interior. I loved it – and yet something troubled me. How could a book published at the height of apartheid, in the very year Verwoerd was assassinated, become a classic, particularly a rural classic, without mentioning, other than in passing, a person of colour? White South Africans, it seems, prize the outdoor life precisely because of all the sand in which they might bury their heads.

I edged the nose of the Beluga into the current. Faans waved goodbye, my address clutched in his hand. '*Sê vir jou vrinne, welkom in die Richtersveld. En dis die Cloetes wat so sê* - tell your friends, welcome to the Richtersveld. And it's the Cloetes that say so.' I caught up with the others. Laurence's repair seemed to be holding up well. Indeed, Sonja and Svenja, relieved of their gear, were outstripping the rest of us. We paddled past the terrible stench of dead fish. They were trapped in a tent that had snagged on a branch near the bank. The result, no doubt, of a Richtersveld storm ripping through some riverside camp. A breeze came up at our backs and we docked together, held our blades in the air, a garish flotilla with high-tech sails. Chris and Laurence came steaming past, powered by Rebecca's kite. 'It's a pity tailwinds are rare!' shouted Chris, his smile threatening to meet itself at the back of his head.

André docked on the Namibian side, scrambled up a gravel embankment. We had arrived, he announced, at Boplaas, Kobus Jansen's camp on the Orange. I was delighted the girls had arranged to stop here; we would now get to meet this legend of the lower Orange. 'Kobus has decided fuck the regular world,' Felix had told us. 'He's an absolute one of a kind.' We hauled our boats up the gravel slope, shouldered our gear, followed an eroded watercourse. We emerged to emerald lawns and murderous heat. A low reed house, backing onto riverine bush, overlooked the lawns and the dust-brown koppie beyond. There was someone sitting in the shaded porch. I

walked over. A man in his sixties, pipe, leather hat, barefoot with black rugby shorts and a deeply tanned chest. He looked strong, sinewy as a piece of old biltong. '*Ja*,' drawled Kobus as I approached, '*ek was op Scorpion vanmiddag* - I was at Scorpion this afternoon, it was forty-seven degrees in the shade.' He studied me with shrewd, lively eyes. I was slightly unnerved, said something silly about wet river and dry land. '*Ja*,' he cut me short, '*ek sit hier op my stoep en kry 'n gevoel van lekkerte* - I sit here on my porch and get a feeling of niceness.' He offered me a chair. Kobus and Susanna Jansen have lived at the Fish River confluence for twenty years. Kobus used to trek from grazing ground to grazing ground along the Fish, first with karakul sheep, later with goats. When he lost everything to drought, he decided to 'make rain' on the Orange. He raised *boerbok* goats, planted lucerne, offered four day horse rides to Ai-Ais on the Fish River canyon. When commercial river trips started, he teamed up with River Runners, gave clients a 'paddle and saddle' experience. Now he concentrates on overland guests, advertises in Germany. Kobus doesn't own his land, Felix had told me: 'He's a squatter. He has no regard for regulations.' The Ai-Ais Nature Reserve sent police around to scare him, took him to court. Kobus's lawyer told the judge that Namibia had no jurisdiction over his client. The Orange River and all the land below flood high water on either bank belong to South Africa. He packed his satchel and marched Kobus out of court. 'I take my hat off to Kobus,' said Felix. 'He's determined to be his own master at any cost. He's eked out a living there without help from man or beast.'

I leaned back in my chair. Hanging from the reed veranda were several clinkles, the wire devices designed to hold down champagne corks. Kobus followed my gaze. '*O ja, dit was oujaarsaand 'n jaar terug* - oh yes, that was New Year's Eve a year ago. There were two young men and four women staying here that

night, canoeists like you. We had a *groot opskop* - big party.' My friend Lance had talked about a new year's party on the river.

'*Was een van daai kêrels se naam miskien Lance*?' I asked, 'Was one of them named Lance perhaps?'

'*Ja, ja, Lance. Sulke lang hare, krillerig, so 'n bietjie bles* - long hair, curly, slightly balding.'

Lance and his friends had camped at Boplaas on New Year's Eve. Quiet at first, Kobus became unstoppable after a couple of brandy and cokes. He put on *Liewe Lulu* - Dear Lulu, a staple of platteland dance, played it repeatedly. He insisted that Lisa, the tallest of the girls, dance with him. 'He held me close,' she told me, grimacing, 'one hand on my bum, his head between my breasts.' The next morning Lance was drinking coffee on the porch with Susanna and Klein Kobus, her son. Kobus, hung-over, wanting attention, called for coffee from his caravan. Susanna ignored him. He called again. Then suddenly a bullet exploded through the roof of the caravan and rifled off into the quiet dawn.

'*Ek dink pa is wakker*,' said Klein Kobus, 'I think dad's awake.' The gunshot echoed off down the valley. '*Ek neem hom sy koffie*,' said Susanna, 'I'll take him his coffee.'

I didn't ask Kobus to verify this story. I was still a bit scared of him, I suppose, after what Felix had told me. Felix and his friend Murray had been drinking brandy and coke with Kobus one evening. Every couple of drinks Murray got up and pee on Kobus's lawn. Each time Kobus would say, '*Murray, daar's 'n spoeltoilet binne* - there's a flush toilet inside.' Murray peed on the lawn once too often. Kobus threw the table over in a rage, sending their drinks flying, and stormed off to fetch his gun. It was left to Felix to try and restrain Kobus as he took potshots through the shadecloth at Murray, who was vanishing into the lucerne. 'Dealing with Kobus,' comments Felix, 'is like dealing with an Alsatian. If you run, you'll get hammered.' Their run-ins

continued down the years. Felix and Carlos once finished a canoe trip at Boplaas, only to find their truck parked in by a bulldozer.

A couple of the girls walked past us to the showers. Kobus leaned back, pulled on his pipe, told me how much he had enjoyed dropping them off at the river the previous morning: '*Dis ongelooflik dat ek al hierdie mooi meisies in my ou beeslorrie gery het* - I can't believe I drove all these lovely girls in my old cattle truck.' Kobus seemed to be warming to me. I decided to run Felix's story by him. As soon as I said the word 'Felix' Kobus sat up in his chair. When I had finished, he burst out laughing. '*Dis Felix self wat op my gras gemors het* - it was Felix himself that messed on my lawn.' In Kobus's version of events, he accosted Felix and two friends with a whip. '*Drie van hulle, en net ekke, en hulle't gehensop* - three of them, and just me, and they put their hands up.' Kobus launched into a tirade about how Felix had thought he was a big dog when he arrived there, about how one must do as the Germans do when you're in Germany, as the Russians when in Moscow. A man visiting him, insisted Kobus, must fit in with his rules. '*En in elk geval, van die dag dat ek gebore is, neem ek nie kak van 'n kaboutertjie nie* - and in any case, from the day I was born I've never taken shit from a goblin.' Which is a pretty good description of Felix – short, wizened, mischievous. It dawned on me that Kobus shares these attributes. He too has that impish glint to his eye, those cracks radiating out. With each passing minute he looked more like Felix. Perhaps their similarity fuels their rivalry. 'We've had epics,' said Felix. 'There's a hell of a lot of mutual respect.' I asked Kobus when he had first met Felix. The year he planted *spanspek*, he said, the year he drove down to Velddrif with R8 000 to buy a tractor and people tried to talk him into spending the money on sour milk.

'*Sê vir my, vrou*,' he shouted over his shoulder, 'tell me, wife, when was that Kubus thing.'

'*1984 of 1985*,' she shouted back. *Kubus kwekery* - Kubus cultivation was an investment fad that swept through rural South Africa in the early 1980s. Adriaan Nieuwoudt of Garies sold investors a yellow, powdery substance which they added to milk. After the mixture had fermented for a week, the growers skimmed off the top layer, dried it, and posted it back to Nieuwoudt, who paid them. Nieuwoudt claimed the dried culture was a key ingredient in a new line of cosmetics. What he was actually doing was using the income from new investors to pay existing investors. Like any chain scheme, *Kubus kwekery* relied on investor greed and an ever-increasing support base. One of our neighbours in Wolseley got in early, sent off his dried culture each month and received R40 a month for over two years – not bad for an initial investment of R40. Most people, though, on receiving their first payment, got greedy. There are stories of Karoo farmers selling off farms, setting up milk culture factories in sheep sheds. Hundreds of thousands of investors were drawn in. Powdered milk sales boomed. The Garies post office was innundated – apparently it had to build an extra room just for Nieuwoudt's post. In 1984 the Ministry of Trade stepped in and closed down the operation.

Laurence walked over, said dinner was ready. I thanked Kobus, put out my hand. He twisted his torso to get his hand to mine. His right upper arm, it seemed, was lame. '*Dis nie die Kobus Jansen wat Felix geken het nie. My skouer droog uit* - this isn't the Kobus Jansen Felix knew. My shoulder is drying up.'

I settled down on the lawn with a plate of delicious-smelling something. Mimi moved closer. She seemed hesitant, looked back at Ingrid, who waved her on. Mimi turned and faced me, square-on. 'Are you gay?'

'No.'

She nodded towards Laurence and Chris, who were doling out the food, fooling around, laughing. 'But your friends are, aren't they?'

I shared this little encounter with Chris and Lol after dinner. They were delighted. Mimi's questions reinforced the unity of our little band. After our friction earlier in the trip, we were clearly comfortable around one another again. We stayed up until midnight, chatting, saying our goodbyes. When the girls had all gone to bed, Chris, Laurence and I slipped off to the river. Liza saw us go, grabbed Adéle and joined us. We dived into black water, swam out into the cool tug of the current. Twenty yards from the bank our feet touched the bottom again. We stood waist-deep on a sandbank, leaning into the secure supporting presence of the Orange. The mountains opposite were silhouetted against the night sky – deep blue, twinkling, incomprehensible. Bats swooped past us. A shooting star streaked upriver. We formed ourselves into a circle, each facing out, our shoulders touching. We stood like that for twenty minutes, counted sixteen shooting stars, seventeen satellites, and an aeroplane.

VIII

It's easy to miss the Fish River confluence from the seat of a kayak. You pass a break in the trees on the right bank, a dry watercourse, the usual tangle of inhospitable rock, and then trees again.

We coiled our bow ropes, led our boats like horses up the shallow inlet, cooked breakfast on the sun-baked mud – *mieliepap*, bacon and beans, banana. It was difficult to imagine the Fish ever flowing. Kobus Jansen had described it in flood: a wall of boiling mud that tears across the Orange, dams it, causes the water level to rise at Boplaas, five kilometres upstream.

This aerial photograph is from the 1986 edition of *The Glamour of Prospecting*. It is easy to see why Fred Cornell, in 1911, should have described 'the mouth of the Great Fish River, where it debouches

into the Orange' as 'one of the wildest and most remote and difficult of access of all spots in this deserted region.' Cornell's Nama guide Ezaak became uneasy a few miles downstream of the confluence. 'We asked him why, and after beating about the bush for a bit he told me that in the middle of the river, and exactly opposite where we were camped, was a big rock in which the huge snake (the "Groot Slang," in which every Richtersfeldt Hottentot firmly believes) had his home, and that it was not safe for us or for our horses.' The *Grootslang* appears to be the only surviving legend of the Orange. Sober accounts tell of a great snake called Kiman cruising the remote canyons between Augrabies and the Richtersveld, preying on stock. The colourful ones claim the snake has a diamond embedded in its forehead, that it entices young girls into the water and knocks men down with its breath. All drownings on the Orange are the snake's work. '*Kiman*,' a shepherd near Kum Kum warned us, '*moenie hom vaskyk nie, hy's aantreklik* - don't look him in the eye, he's attractive, he'll draw you towards him with invisible wires.'

We paddled past red peaks and white, and purple fold mountains like those encircling Cape Town. Great blocks of riven granite littered the river, making for playful rapids. As the mountains started to recede, giving way to a sandy coastal plain, the beauty of our surrounds came increasingly to be marred by a phenomenon we called 'diamond ugly'. At first the deserted caravans and corrugated remains of failed claims seemed quaint, the exploratory diggings, the mining equipment abandoned in the middle of nowhere. Then 'diamond ugly' cranked up a few notches. A mine on the South African bank, its dumps scarring the Richtersveld National Park; conveyors and low, ill-tempered buildings; the cylindrical tower of a separation plant, a beacon to progress in anti-rust red. Terraced ledges on the Namibian side, stripped, the gravel washed bare, against a backdrop of Namdeb slagheaps. All of this, we were well aware, was small fry in

comparison to Alexcor's operation at the river mouth. A friend of mine had gone on a mine tour at Alexander Bay – an ugly little town, he said, grafted onto the gravel. He had been shepherded through elaborate security cordons, then bundled into a minivan and driven past mile upon mile of ancient seabed terraces ravaged by heavy machinery. A fragile country laid waste by war. The gravel trenches called to mind a battlefield somewhere in Lombardy – the Somme, as he put it, contested by giants in a desert. Then they came to the machinery. Tippers, dumpers, scrapers, tyres, trucks and trailers, pickups, vans and cars, a mountain of busted glass and rusted steel, denatured rubber and peeling yellow paint, all piled up together in one of the biggest scrapyards on earth. The tour guide explained that ever since the authorities cottoned on to workers stashing diamonds in the heavy machinery, or depositing them in the petrol tanks of unsuspecting mine managers' cars, no vehicle that enters the mine may leave again.

The wind, as usual, picked up after lunch. It ripped off the tops of the riverine dunes. Our sunglasses became sandglasses – and waterglasses, too, as the westerly piled the water into waves, whipped them to spray. The comedy of it. Three men propelling two yellow plastic containers into the teeth of a gale. The magnificence! Two hours later we were still raging – we felt as if we could keep going indefinitely. Perhaps we had eaten too much Skippy peanut butter at lunch. We set up camp for the night on the Namibian bank opposite Sendelingsdrif, once a ford of early missionaries to the Damara, now little more than a compound for Reuning diamond mine. It was still early, four o'clock. I paddled across the river to a disused slipway next to a hideous fort-like building. From the top of the slipway I could see Reuning's man-made mesas, great trapeziums of stripped overburden, which is to say the remains of a delicate ecosystem. In the foreground fences and barbs and 'Keep Out' signs, a moonscape criss-crossed

with moonbuggy tracks, and behind, Kodasberg, Noemeesberg, Vandersterrberg, the line of jagged mountains that divides the Richtersveld in two. I walked into a café, asked the way to the offices

of the Richtersveld National Park. '*Net hier langsaan, meneer*,' said the girl behind the counter, 'right next door, by the *matjieshuis*.' The domed hut was immaculately reeded for tourists. The working *matjieshuise* I'd seen at Riemvasmaak and Witbank had been covered in hessian, patched with plastic.

The beautiful cadences of the Nama language floated from the doorway of the park offices. A man in green uniform was talking on the telephone, fast gentle clicks like pebbles rolling in a stream. He motioned for me to look around. I picked up a brochure, started to read: 'The RNP was established in 1991 as the first Park in South Africa to incorporate traditional semi-nomadic pastoral utilization as part of its concept of conservation.' *Ja* right, I thought. You guys at National Parks only let the herders in because they took you to the Supreme Court. Willem de Wet replaced the receiver, introduced himself. He was delighted to hear I was writing a book. '*Kom, mannetjie, laat ons praat*,' he said, showing me to a chair, 'let's talk.' Both he and his father, said Willem, had been community signatories to the negotiated agreement of 1991. Now he's a *skakelbeampte* - liaison officer for the park: '*Ek boer in die gemeenskap* - I farm with the community.' Excellent, I thought, I'm not going to get the official park line from Willem, the new approach to conservation blah-blah, all that social ecological vision nonsense.

In 1973 the government approached the *Plaaslike Bestuursraad* - local authority of the Richtersveld coloured reserve about the possibility of establishing a park. 'The *Bestuursraad* were puppets,' says Willem, 'rubber stamps for the government.' At a time when most Richtersvelders knew nothing about the proposed park, outdoor enthusiasts in Johannesburg and Cape Town were reading about it in their exclusive magazines. The articles carried titles such as 'Richtersveld – treasure chest for a botanist' and 'To save a mountain desert.' By the late 1980s the local authority were ready to close the deal. The community only realised something was afoot when an Afrikaner leaned from his 4x4 and yelled to Koos Jossob on his donkey cart: '*Een van die dae gaan hierdie plek 'n park word en jy sal moet uit met jou bokke* - one of these days this place is going to become a park and you and your goats will have to go.' In March 1989 Willem de Wet travelled to the Supreme Court in Cape Town. A day before the Richtersvelders' land was to be signed away, he obtained an interdict to block proceedings. The community boycotted their local authority, and negotiated directly with the Parks Board. '*Waarom wild die kant, bok daai kant?*' asks Willem, 'why game this side, goat that side? We are conservationists, we know what we're doing. We don't farm in camps. When the first rains fall in winter we move to the mountains, in summer we move to the river. *Hierdie Parke mense het nie die praktiese ondervinding van grondslag soos ons nie* - these Parks people don't have our practical knowledge.'

The Richtersvelders now lease land to the Parks Board. They have a say in its management and use it to gather honey and customary plants, to graze 6 600 sheep and goats. Laurence had told me of suspicions in botanical circles that this stock limit was being exceeded. I said as much to Willem. '*Watter vleiskoerant het jy gelees*?' he asked, 'what meat-newspaper [i.e. person] did you read? The guy who does our counting happens to be here right now...

Howard!' A young man in Parks uniform appeared in the doorway. Willem introduced Howard Hendricks, a researcher based in Kimberley. Stock numbers, explained Howard, sometimes exceed 6 600 in summer, but never by more than ten percent. In winter they drop well below the limit. 'Besides,' he said, 'a German doctoral student found little difference between the areas she fenced off from goats and those she didn't. The ecosystem is as it is partly due to centuries of grazing.' Howard paused, smiled an impish smile. 'The botanists and their 4x4s probably cause more damage than the goats.'

Willem fixed on me with his sharp, lively eyes. 'We've been here for hundreds of years. We love this place. I ask you, are we the ones destroying the environment? Just look out that door at what Transhex are doing in their search for diamonds.' I'd seen the torn earth, the cones of raw rock. Willem was right, of course. The Nama, in over a thousand years of continuous occupation, have had a far smaller impact on the Richtersveld environment than mining concerns have in the past eighty. The archaeological record points to hunter-gatherers 4 000 years ago (stone tools, ostrich eggshell beads, dassie and fish bones) and Khoi herders 1 500 years ago (potsherds, the remains of fat-tailed sheep). For centuries the Nama of the Richtersveld lived a pastoral existence with their sheep. They also hunted game, collected roots and berries, sowed wheat after floods. Around the year 1700 they bartered goats from the Batlhaping. 'Goats are like us brown people,' explains a Nama herder, 'we can live on anything, for instance just brown bread. But sheep are like white people, who eat only white bread, they need special soft grasses, juicy grasses and lots of water.' Today goats account for over eighty percent of Richtersveld stock.

Outsiders started to arrive in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Their occupations read like a thumbnail history of the Richtersveld – explorers, missionaries, farmers, botanists, geologists,

prospectors, miners. In the 1830s Basters pressed north from Namaqualand, in the 40s the Richtersveld became part of the Cape Colony, prompting the arrival of white *trekboers* in the 50s and 60s. By the end of the nineteenth century the Nama of the Richtersveld were among the last of the Khoi people still living their traditional pastoral life. Their isolation had spared them from the labour demands of Namaqualand's farms and copper mines. The Khoi living further south, those lucky enough to have escaped wage labour that is, gathered at mission stations. They used the church to protect their land against encroaching Basters and Boers. This route had hazards of its own. There are stories of missionaries on horseback herding their flock on Sundays, making liberal use of their whips. In 1909 the Mission Stations and Reserves Act relieved the church of its secular duties, and the mission lands became known as Coloured Reserves or Rural Coloured Areas. By 1930 there were twenty-three coloured reserves in all, the largest of them in Namaqualand: Richtersveld, Pella, Steinkopf, Leliefontein, Concordia, Komaggas. These institutions have continued through to the present under the successive guidance of district magistrates (pre-apartheid), the Department of Coloured Affairs (early apartheid), the House of Representatives (late apartheid), and the Department of Land Affairs (post-apartheid).

In 1929 a school opened at Kuboes (also spelt Kubus, Khubus, Khuboes, Kuboos, Xuboos, Xoeboes, or Koeboes). Many Nama left the river, moved closer, became more sedentary. With the advent of apartheid their culture and language started to die. '*Toe Afrikaans kom raak Nama weg*,' says Willem, 'when Afrikaans came, Nama disappeared. Only the place names remained, then they too began to change.' The victory over the Parks Board sparked something of a revival. Today the Nama of the Richtersveld still herd goats and use seasonal stockposts; they still, some of them, live in *matjieshuise* with

skerms - circular cooking shelters fashioned from *Galencia africana* bushes; they hang their meat and cooking utensils on *n//a* poles and eat *asbrood* and *kop-en-pootjies*. This last bastion of Khoi culture, though, is under siege from a new wave of invaders that has swept into the Richtersveld in the last twenty years – anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, journalists, photographers, film-makers, canoeists, 4x4 enthusiasts, eco-tourists, lovers of wilderness.

I asked Willem to say more about the Nama revival. Fifteen years ago, he told me, the Richtersvelders rejected the word Nama. It made them sound backward, '*soos simpel Hotnots* - like primitive Khoi.' They chose to be *kleurling* - coloured instead. Coloured had obvious negative connotations in apartheid South Africa. What the Nama were saying, though, was that they were in no way inferior to any other coloureds. During their fight with the Parks Board, the Nama realised that their descent from the original inhabitants of the area was a critical factor in their claim to the land. They took new pride in their origins, talked to the *grootmense* - old people, reclaimed their culture.

'*Wat sê die mense deesdae van kleurling*,' I asked, 'what do people make of the word coloured today? What do you make of it, Willem?'

'*Die Kaapse kleurling is 'n vlêrmuis* - the Cape coloured is a bat, not a bird in the air, nor a mouse on the ground, but caught between the two of them.' He paused, allowed this image to sink in. '*Ek is Nama. As ek kleurling word verloor ek als, my kultuur, my tradiesie, my taal* - I am Nama. If I become coloured I lose everything, my culture, my tradition, my language.' Oh dear. Always this same old story. Griquas, Basters, Nama, San – they each have their own culture, they will tell you, but they lose it the moment they become coloured. Why does coloured have to mean loss? Why can't it mean gain? Is there no way of turning this thing around, of appropriating coloured like rap artists have appropriated nigger? Of using

colouredness as a catalyst for a vibrant new culture, a culture rooted in the /Xam words so prominent on the national coat of arms: *!ke e: /xarra //ke* - diverse people unite. Viewed in non-racial terms, coloured is the perfect place to be, a coming together of different traditions, a focal point for the future. I looked down at my notes, at the topics I had still wanted to discuss with Willem – the plans for a transfrontier park with Ai-Ais in Namibia, the Richtersveld land claims, Alexkor's pollution of the wetlands at the mouth. They seemed unimportant now, political ephemera of interest perhaps to a journalist. What I wanted to know, in the intensifying silence of Willem's office, was whether the future is brown. Will we all be the same colour one day?

I paddled back across the river, helped Laurence set up camp while Chris prepared dinner. Barking geckos came to the entrances of their burrows, filled the warm air with their call, a hollow sound not unlike the clicking of two billiard balls held in one's palm. At dusk Laurence positioned us around the fire, took a five-second exposure. Later, when it was dark, he wound back the frame and opened the shutter for an hour, captured star trails, wrote 'The Orange Affair' with a torch.

Early in the morning session we entered a series of broad meanders. Banded martins swooped at the rapids. Off to our right, an osprey soared above the jagged orange cliffs of Gomtsawibberg. Somewhere along this stretch of river Adolf Lüderitz – merchant, imperialist, madman – climbed into a canvas folding boat and embarked on his last, tragic journey. He was looking for diamonds and gold along the banks, desperate to resurrect his dream of becoming another Cecil John Rhodes. Lüderitz had landed at Angra Pequena, a small bay 250 kilometres north of the Orange River mouth, in 1883. Ever the optimist, he described the Namib dunes bordering on the cold Atlantic as 'the pure land of Tyrol, only the streams are missing.' He purchased Angra Pequena and the adjacent land from a local chief and set up a trading store. The following year Bismarck suddenly awoke to the scramble for Africa and sent out urgent telegrams for the German flag to be hoisted in Cameroon, Togoland, Angra Pequena. Backed now by the German Foreign Office, Lüderitz entered into a series of fraudulent treaties. He acquired 240 000 square kilometres of land, including a strip of coast from the Cape Colony to Angola, for £1000 worth of goods and 260 rifles. 'It is one of history's ironies,' writes Horst Drechsler in *Let Us Die Fighting* (1966), 'that in order to penetrate South West Africa the German colonizers offered arms to the Africans.' It cost the Germans twenty years, and much blood, to disarm them again.

Lüderitz mounted costly expeditions in search of diamonds, silver and gold. His biggest expedition, led by mining director Pohle, headed south to the mouth of the Orange River. 'At the edge of the old river bed,' reads an entry in Pohle's diary, '...we sank a shaft hoping to find diamonds or sand containing gold. The first-mentioned could be possible because the Modder River near Kimberley, where the diamonds are situated, is a tributary of the Orange River. We found

nothing!' Lüderitz received several letters accusing Pohle of deceit and laziness. 'The pity,' wrote one detractor, 'is that the Pohle expedition made an attempt with a lot of shouting and bravado and then, instead of really working and drilling, simply sat down, fell asleep and didn't do anything. I request you once again, esteemed Mr. Lüderitz, please do not think badly of the Orange River – the misery is that the right people were not there.' Lüderitz, almost bankrupt, his dreams of mineral wealth slipping away, decided to visit the mouth of the Orange himself. He left Angra Pequena in June 1886 and discovered first-hand the conditions under which Pohle had been forced to operate: wagons sinking in deep sand, or breaking to pieces on outcrops of rock, oxen running wild across desolate plateaux, having to drink brackish water from wells dug by hand. Lüderitz and three companions joined the Orange fifty miles from the mouth. They launched in two collapsible canvas boats made in Germany. When their amateurish search for minerals along the banks came to nothing, Lüderitz was driven to a final act of madness. He decided to sail back to Angra Pequena in one of the canvas boats, the trunk of a small tree for a mast, a linen sheet for a sail. Joseph Steingröver, a sailor on Lüderitz's schooner, opted to join him. Provisioned with a calf's maw of fresh water, six bottles of cold coffee, a few tins of meat and some rusks, the two men sailed through the Orange River mouth on 23 October 1886. They were never seen again.

In 1907 diamonds were found in the sands south of Lüderitzbucht, the name given to Angra Pequena in honour of its missing founder. Fred Cornell was convinced these diamonds came from inland pipes, that they had been carried down the Orange and then up the coast. He washed gravels at Sendelingsdrif for weeks on end. Like Lüderitz and Pohle, he missed the bonanza. 'Cornell was one of the unluckiest of prospectors,' wrote the *Cape Times* in April 1927, at the height of the Alexander Bay diamond rush. 'He was

constantly on the edge of great discoveries; his theories were invariably sound; but the discoveries themselves eluded him.' Cornell's theories were certainly sound. As Kimberlite pipes in the interior weathered over the centuries, diamond were carried downstream by the Vaal and Orange river systems. They accumulated in relict river terraces near the mouth or were carried out to sea and deposited on ancient beaches.

In 1925 Jack Carstens found diamonds south of Port Nolloth. When Solomon Rabinowitz uncovered 334 stones at Buchuberg, syndicates scrambled for claims at the mouth. Over a thousand fortune hunters flocked to the desert coast, most of them from the diggings at Lichtenburg and Kimberley. 'What a lot they were!' wrote Cornell of the men who had rushed to Lüderitzbucht twenty years before. 'Only a small minority were genuine prospectors... the majority were shady 'company promoters,' bucket-shop experts, warned-off bookmakers and betting men ('brokers' they usually styled themselves), and sharpers of all sorts, on the lookout for prey in the shape of lucky diggers or discoverers. Then, too, there were a number of self-styled 'prospectors,' runaway ships' cooks, stewards, stokers, and seamen, the bulk of whom had never seen a rough diamond in their lives.' There would be little on offer for most of these people. In 1926 Hans Merensky arrived on the scene and bought up all the claims along a bed of fossil oysters. His diggers found 487 diamonds under a single stone – blue-white, white, silver, yellow and green, some of them perfect, as if they'd just been cut. The government, fearing a collapse in the international diamond market, prohibited further prospecting. They granted discovery rights to six claims. Merensky, who owned three of them already, bought out the other three. The government then passed a bill allowing it to set up the State Alluvial Diggings at the Orange River mouth. Most of the diggers

had no option but to work on the new road to Alexander Bay for 3/6 (35c) a day.

Today diamonds are mined along the coast for hundreds of kilometres either side of the Orange River mouth. Operators have spiralled off upstream to Sanddrif, Bloeddrif, Jakalsberg, Sendelingsdrif, Oenas near Pooitjiespram, and Grasdrif. The madness of it all. The open cast strip mining, the devastated sandveld vegetation, the transformation of the coloured reserves into pools of cheap labour. San and Nama children, writes one historian, used to play with bright stones in the vicinity of the mouth. They never actively looked for diamonds, he comments, '*omdat hulle nie die waarde daarvan besef het nie* - because they didn't realise their value.' Which, of course, entirely misses the point. Diamonds *are* just bright stones.

We stopped for lunch at Bloeddrif, literally Blood Drift, named, no doubt, for some forgotten incident in our country's violent past. We lay down in the shade of a scraggly acacia. There were no other plants; nothing to absorb solar energy. Just sand and outcrops of black rock.

The heat was vicious. And wonderful. It cauterises me, heat like this, burns me clean, leaves me feeling crisp and elemental. It was hard to believe, lying in the hot shade, looking out at the sandbars that had started to invade the river, that we were only a day from icy seas.

The midday heat gave way to a nasty afternoon wind. There was nothing for it but to square our jaws and thrash into it. Two hours later we approached Sanddrif, a mining town on the South African side. The banks were green again, densely wooded in fact, with no campsite in the offing. 'Hey,' said Chris, 'pointing off to our right, 'what about that little island?' It was certainly little – fifteen metres, perhaps, by eight – and yet big enough for a sandy beach, a flat grassy interior, a few trees, some firewood. 'I love islands,' announced Chris. They reminded him, he said, of his year on the dhow, sailing from the Bazaruto archipelago to Pemba near Zanzibar, stopping *en route* at islands too small to have a name, sleeping on their beaches. Mid-reminiscence, Chris decided he needed cigarettes and jumped into the Beluga. As I watched him power over to Sanddrif, I noticed a cellphone mast on a hill downriver of us. I started digging out my phone. Who would I call, though? What would I say? It seemed so private, our little world. How could I explain the emotion of our last night on the river? How could I possibly, in the course of a phone call, pluck someone from the busyness of her own life, and expect to give her some sense of our little green island marooned here in this great brown course of frontier history? And my feelings, what could I say of them, a whirl of so many things, the culmination of things spoken and unspoken, and yet so much still unsaid? I left the cellphone in its watertight bag, and helped Laurence unpack the boats.

'Laurence! Billy! Quick, get in the double! Come and join me!' Chris was halfway back from Sanddrif, yelling from his kayak. He had stumbled upon a travelling troupe who were about to perform in the Sanddrif community centre. We arrived just as the actors were about to go on stage. They waved us in ahead of them. Late afternoon sun streamed into the crowded hall, people on chairs, squeezed onto benches, standing at the back. They fell silent as we entered. We could, I suppose, have been the players in some crazy spoof, kitted

out as we were in our swimming costmes, broad hats and bright anti-safari shirts. The director (so the white letters on his black t-shirt announced) made some space for us on the floor next to his chair. 'Psssssssst, psssssst!' The actors were moving through the audience, offering them illicit diamonds. 'Psssssssssssst!' They gathered on stage, three of them in black t-shirts, blue overalls tied at the waist: 'We come here to tell you a story today, *dis 'ie selle ou storie,* crime duzzen pay...' Oh dear, I thought, a morality play sponsored by the mine. How can they possibly hope to pull this off? I glanced up at the director. He winked at me. 'These stones, *tshhh, tshh*, may be the symbol of love everlasting... [hip hop sound effects, scratching] ...but we're the ones doing the blasting.' Okay, so they weren't about to alienate their audience. I looked around. There were perhaps a hundred people in all, mostly miners in blue overalls. Almost everyone was wearing headgear – safety helmets, caps, beanies, stripey balaclavas. Three youths had their heads wrapped in bandages. They had burnt their scalps, I later learned, with hair removal cream. I turned back to the stage. Two of the actors had turned themselves into a digger, one with his legs clasped around the other's waist. They lifted, extended, dropped down to dig, reversed and changed gear to a full suite of sound effects, like a child in a sand pit. The *Osshhh oshh* of industrial brakes announced the arrival of a bus. One of the actors grabbed a steering wheel, the other two climbed on board, knocked their heads on the roof as the driver sped off along bumpy roads. One of the passengers leaned out of the window and took in the landscape. 'Namaqualand, Namaqualand,' he

announced with a broad sweep of his arm, 'Richtersveld, Richtersveld... *Fokall*!' The audience screeched with laughter. Except for one old man with strong Nama features, who waved his stick at the stage and demanded: 'Who are you? Why must I listen to you?' His neighbour tried to calm him. 'Why are you here, who's paying you?' These are good questions, I thought, I must talk to him afterwards.

The action shifted to a bar, two miners watching television: 'Hey look, here's that new show, Red Card.' The miners became hosts: 'Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the World Cup of crime and corruption, the show where nobody walks away a winner. We invite you, the audience at home, to show the red card to crime, to blow the whistle on corruption. So let's all *fluit fluit*, come on, *fluit fluit misdaad uit* - whistle whistle crime away.' And then a change of scene, a hostel bathroom. Three miners brushing their teeth, horizontal strokes, 'fluoride fluoride fluoride,' vertical strokes, 'plaque plaque plaque.' They stood at the urinal. The white actor fiddled with his zip and, 'Plips,' extended a finger; 'Plops,' the coloured actor extended two fingers; 'KaPloff!,' the black actor flopped down his forearm. The audience went beserk, particularly the women. They rocked back and forwards in their chairs, buried their heads in their hands, wiped away tears. Each time the actors tried to move on, hysteria set in again. The heckler, I noticed, was laughing despite himself.

A miner named Tommy witnessed a diamond theft, became an accomplice. What about the *fluit fluit* number, Tommy agonised, what if someone reports me? He decided to call the number himself: 'Welcome to Tipoffs Anonymous, for English press 1, *isiZulu thindizela*

u 2, vir Afrikaans druk 3.' Tommy left the phone off the hook, joined the other two for the closing rap sequence: '*Fluit fluit misdaad uit, jy's die* referee *van jou eie wedstryd, oosh-oosh*, give the red card to crime, jus pick up the line, it's anonymous all of the time, *aisch-aisch*, no one can see, telling the truth it sets you free... *fluit dit uit fluit dit uit fluit dit uit*!'

I turned to the director, congratulated him. 'Thanks,' he said, staring through me with his pale blue eyes, the type that resist interrogation. 'Industrial theatre's the only way to go with a complex issue like this theft thing. I mean the workers feel the diamonds are theirs, that they're being robbed of them by the whites. You could never have a government or company person stand up there and hope to cover so much ground.' The director and his players were on a roadtrip, he said, launching an anti-crime call-line at Transhex mines – Hondeklip Baai, Port Nolloth, the Richtersveld, Douglas.

The old heckler shuffled past me on his way to the door. '*Dis als net blerrie* propoganda,' he muttered to his companion.

'*Jammer, oom,*' I said, '*kan ek so 'n bietjie met oom praat* - could I talk to you for a while.'

He turned to face me, narrowed his eyes: '*Waaroor*?'

'*Ek skryf 'n boek* - I'm writing a book about the people of the river. I wanted to ask you some questions about the Richtersveld. About the coloured people.'

'*Die kleurling*? *Die kleurling is die witman se hoerkind. My Bybel sê so, wat sê joune*? - the coloured is the white man's whore-child. My Bible says so, what does yours say?' I was still recovering from this first volley, when he fired again: '*Dis waarom hulle die kleurlings gemaak het, om 'n plek vir hul hoerkinders te kry* - that's why they made the coloureds, to find a place for their whore-children.' He leaned over forwards, slapped some non-existent dust from his trousers.

'*Nama is eerste*,' explained his companion, '*dis 'n ras. Kleurling is net verkleursmannetjie* - Nama is first, it's a race. Coloured is just chameleon.' He took the heckler by the elbow and led him out into the sunshine. I was left to ponder the racism of the Richtersveld. Two days earlier Faans Cloete had been telling me he wasn't a Hotnot, but a genuine Baster. Now these two old men were telling me that Nama was a race to be proud of, and that Basters were whore-children. These people were more caught up in the racist ideology of the settlers, it seemed, than the settlers themselves ever were.

'I wouldn't worry too much about Oom Petrus.'

I looked up. A young woman was standing in front of me. She had dreadlocks, a bandana, surprisingly pale skin for her sharp Khoi features. 'He's built a fortress around himself, like many of his generation. He keeps within the walls, keeps on reproducing society as he knows it. He doesn't even realise he's perpetuating apartheid.'

'So you heard our little chat then?'

'Yes. Oom Petrus's usual *hoerkind* tirade. You're lucky he spared you his *hotnotsmeid* and *halfnaaitjie* spiels. I also heard Oom Koos's chameleon comment. It amused me. Ten years ago, under apartheid, those two were happy to be coloured. Nama was seen as backward then. Today it means more access to resources. Oom Koos knows full well that there's much to be said for the chameleon nature of colouredness.'

Sandra Langeveldt worked for a rural development NGO based in Cape Town. 'I was born in Nababiep, though, here in Namaqualand.' I asked her what she thought of the word coloured. 'It's problematic, of course, it sees colour, it sees difference. And then there's the way it's used... as a sort of approach to whiteness, light skin, straight hair, the rejection of all things African.' Sandra paused, looked at me, sensed I was keen to hear more. 'I hate it when people call me coloured,' she said, her hands tensioning like claws. 'They want to put me in this box

with a whole lot of other people with whom I have nothing in common. To hell with them! I mean, yes, some people want this, they want something to cling to, some sense of identity, of conformity. They just mustn't pull me in with them. I mean, coloured identity, what is it? It's scrambled from everywhere like the food we eat, a mixed *bredie* of Dutch, English, Malay, Khoi. Why must I get pissed every Saturday on brandy and coke, and then go to church the next day? Why must I soup up my car, fit mags and a fuck-off sound system, and go drag racing? Why must I be scared of walking in the rain in case my hair minces? *Identiteit kom van binne af* - identity comes from inside, you must define yourself, not live by someone else's definition.'

Laurence tapped me on the shoulder, said he and Chris would paddle back in the double, leave me the single. I turned back to Sandra. Her eyes were flashing, she was fired up. And yet there was something mischievous about her as well. 'I may have overstated my case,' she said. 'I have issues with the word coloured, but I don't reject it outright. There are good things too. For one thing, it's so local. I mean, I'm clearly a product of South Africa, aren't I? You colonists come from Europe, the Nguni people come from further up Africa, but I'm from here. One's always hearing talk that the coloureds are half-breeds with no nationhood, no culture, no land – and that the Europeans and the Africans have this full-blooded tradition stretching back for centuries. The bloody irony of it. Us coloureds are the only people that unambiguously belong to this soil. Our multi-ethnicity should be the coolest thing in the new South Africa, we should be able to fit in anywhere. The only thing standing in our way is a set of tired old stereotypes: God's tragic stepchild, the drunken mulatto, the criminal or the clown, and that old favourite, the privileged black who aspires to be white.' This was exactly what I'd been thinking in Willem's office the previous afternoon: coloured should be cool. No one is better placed to transcend the artificial boundaries of race. The

coloured people's very strength is their diversity, their unique blend of Africanness, Europeanness and Asianness. There is a wonderful passage in William Finnegan's book *Crossing the Line* (1986) in which he describes the student body at Grassy Park High, a coloured school in Cape Town. Their complexions, Finnegan tells us, ranged from coal black to a few shades paler than his own Irish-Scottish colouring; their features ran the gamut from East African to North European, from Malay to Middle Eastern; their surnames were Anglo-Saxon and Islamic, German and African, Indonesian; there were names that recalled the slavery their ancestors had endured – Thursday, September, Hector, Gallant; and there were large numbers of Afrikaans names, the largest cultural source, he tells us, for this ethnic bouillabaise. Finnegan's description is, in some ways, a precis of South Africa's colonial history. And yet it reads like a paean to some utopian future.

'It's a sad irony,' said Sandra, 'that we mourn our greatest asset, our inbetweenness. If only we could couch it in non-racial terms. Phrases like Rainbow Nation are hopeless, they just perpetuate the colour thing.' Sandra's unexpected mention of the Rainbow Nation whisked me back to my living room in Cape Town, to an article I had read in preparation for our trip. Neville Alexander, an educationalist who describes himself as 'formerly coloured', considers the political importance of metaphors in his paper 'Prospects for a nonracial future in South Africa.' He argues that the rainbow metaphor, borrowed from the United States, 'is arguably the worst metaphor with which to symbolize the destiny of the Republic of South Africa.' Instead of this 'foreign, colour-centred image of coexisting racial groups,' Alexander suggests 'the more indigenous image of the Gariep... with its many tributries that have their catchment areas in all parts of the country.' The Gariep as metaphor for a non-racial South Africa, its several ethnic tributries together constituting a new mainstream culture... this

is reason enough, so it seems to me, to revert to the Khoi name, to cut ties once and for all with the Dutch House of Orange.

Chris got up with the sun, made coffee, used the leftover water to shave for the girls of Alexander Bay. He used the blade of his knife as a mirror. We had already used this remarkable tool, in the course of our month on the river, to open beer bottles, chop ginger, crush garlic, dice cashews, de-pip olives, scramble eggs, test butternuts in the fire, stir isotonic powder into water, spread peanut butter onto lemon cream biscuits, remove thorns, cut nails, pick teeth, sharpen pencils, repair the walkman, and whittle a stick to fix the double kayak's steering system.

We angled across to the south bank, and docked at the foot of Koeskop hill. I wanted to see the Kodas inscription, words scratched on rock to commemorate the first cargo of copper ore to be shipped down the Orange. We searched the rock face, but found nothing. Perhaps we were in the wrong place. 'Hang on,' said Chris, 'What's this?' Behind the graffitoed name of Elias Kotze, were faint traces of twenty-centimetre-tall letters:

FIRST OF COP
Elias Kotze ON THE

Karl Reck had chalked the inscription ten years before:

THE FIRST LOAD OF COP--- ---
PAST ---- POINT ON THE --/--/----

He fills in the blanks on page 29 of *Tracks and Trails of the Richtersveld* (1994):

THE FIRST LOAD OF COPper ore
PAST this POINT ON THE day/month/year

The year of the inscription, Reck suggests, is either 1836 or 1837, the years during which Captain James Alexander mined 350 tons of high-grade ore at Kodas, and floated it down to the mouth on a barge during the seasonal floods. Alexander, though, never mined any ore. He visited the river for just three days on his outward journey, and another three on his return the following year. The misunderstanding probably arises from a passage in Alexander's *An Expedition of Discovery into the Interior of Africa, through the Hitherto Undescribed Countries of the Great Namaquas, Boschmans and Hill Damaras* (1838): 'This copper is quite accessible... the ore might be floated down to the mouth on rafts, which rafts might then be sawn up, and sent to the Cape, where wood is always in great demand for building.' It wasn't until 1854 that Thomas Fannin and his South African Mining Company started excavating copper at Kodas, fifteen kilometres south of Sendelingsdrif. The ore was transported to the Orange by ox-wagon, floated on a flat-bottomed barge to a wharf near the mouth,

carried overland to the rocky inlet known as Alexander Bay and shipped to the Cape on the schooners *Shrimp*, *Prince of Wales* and *Glenoor*. The year of the Kodas inscription is thus 1854 or 1855.

Alexander, who reports at some length on his visit to the mouth of the Orange (a river he describes as 'sweep[ing] its course round numerous islands, some of them inhabited by banditti, and others by hippopotami'), has left us an account of one of the area's more unusual hunting practices: 'Besides trees torn up by the roots and rolling down the flood, sick or wounded hippopotami are sometimes borne down from the upper parts towards the mouth; these, occasionally before they reach the sea are fixed in trees, and on the subsiding of the waters, they remain (in Dutch phrase) "spurtelen", or kicking among branches. It must be rather curious to see such monsters aloft; but the natives lose no time in stupid wonder, but quickly dispatch them with their javelins, and make merry over the rich spek, or fat under the skin.'

We dodged sandbanks from Sanddrif to Arisdrif. At Brandkaros we ran into a stiff breeze. Ten minutes later we were thrashing into the teeth of a thirty-knot westerly. 'Excellent,' said Chris. 'These long flats are getting boring. The wind triggers something, you can really growl into it.' He asked for the single, and for Laurence's walkman – and then he was off to Juluka's 'African skies blue,' ripping at the water with the energy of an addict. Laurence and I tried to catch him, eventually gave up and settled for a steady crank. The right bank was now Namib, the southern tail of the most pristine dune desert on earth. Sand whipped off the crests, joined the elemental howl of wind and wave and spray. We thrashed into the maelstrom for an hour, then stopped for tea at Grootderm on the South African bank. It was here, in 1925, that Hendrik Louw shot the last hippopotamus on the Orange. It had wallowed alone in a deep pool on this final bend in the river ever since a hunter had killed its mate five years before. Louw

claims he was painting his boat near the water when the hippo advanced on him from the direction of his homestead. He took no chances. Nor would one have expected him to. This was a man who in his old-age would fire the occasional shot and muse: 'The crack of a rifle is the finest music I can hear, it reminds me of my young days.' His young days on the Orange, roasting flamingos on Sundays, his Martini Henry the only law.

'Yeeeeehah!' Chris threw his arms into the air. Our journey was over. We had docked next to a patch of grass just short of the Alexander Bay - Oranjemund bridge. Road access was limited after the bridge, Peter Unite had warned us, and we would need to arrange for a four-wheel-drive vehicle to fetch us if we wished to paddle the last ten kilometres. We had arranged nothing, knew nobody in Alexander Bay.

In spite of Chris's exhuberance, it seemed a pity to be stopping short of the mouth. Those final few kilometres would have taken us to the

river's end. They would also have given me some visual cue for the history I had read: how Bartolomeu Diaz, hugging the west coast of Africa, missed the Orange River mouth in 1488; how later ships spotted it and stopped there to fill their water barrels; and how Robert Gordon, who had encountered the river on the eastern frontier and named it in honour of his liege, confirmed the name Orange with a ceremony at the mouth in 1779: 'Brought the boat to the water, hoisted the Prince's flag and we drank to the health of His Highness. We bade welcome to the river I gave its name in 1777. Said more concerning the welfare of the Company, and all done to the accompaniment of some shots.' Had we reached the mouth, I'd have been in a better position to recreate this extraordinary spectacle: three men in a boat drinking to the health of a distant monarch at the mouth of a great river rolling from the African desert.

I climbed the bank in search of cellphone reception, emerged on a desolate gravel plain opposite Alexander Bay airport. Peter had given me the number of a guesthouse. Debbie Truter answered, said she could put us up for the night, but she wasn't sure how we would get into town, which was five kilometres from the airport. Her husband was still at work, perhaps I could try his brother Celliers, a policeman at the borderpost. I walked over to the cluster of buildings at the South African end of the bridge. Sergeant Truter wasn't in. I was referred to Danie van Niekerk, tall and blonde, bleached eyebrows, chapped red skin. He was a dog handler from Vryburg – not good credentials in post-apartheid South Africa. He seemed nice enough, though. He was interested in our journey, and agreed to give us a lift to the Truters' guesthouse. '*Nee wag*,' he said when we got to his truck, 'no wait, I can do better than that. Why don't I pick you guys up at the mouth after work, say two hours from now?'

Those last few kilometres of sluggish water, past sandbars and islands of shifting sand, were like a lap of honour to us. The river

opened out into a salty lagoon as we neared that surreal and misty region where the Orange meets the ocean. Off to our left a flock of flamingos, pale pink, one leg bent, sieved shrimp and algae from the shallows. At our approach they looked up, turned, ran off flapping along the surface of the water, wings flashing scarlet and black. One by one they took off, and like flying rods receded into the mist.

Ahead of us we could hear the roar of Atlantic breakers. Two sandbars materialised out of the mist, one stretching out from either bank. There was a gap of perhaps two hundred metres between them, through which the muddy brown press of the Orange rushed out to join the cold, steel-blue sea. We eddied out of the current and docked on the hard wet sand at the edge of the lagoon. There were vehicle tracks everywhere, Danie would see our boats. We walked over to the Atlantic. A fan of brown water pushed the waves back, causing them to break in an arc around the mouth.

Laurence and Chris walked to the end of the sandbar. I turned south, headed off down the beach. It was littered with the debris of floods – the bleached bones of trees, trellising poles, a tangle of driftwood. Had these poles, I wondered, once stood firm in the alluvial soils of Bloemsmond, only to be washed downriver with the rest of Kolie Strauss's farm? The Orange, normally an artery that sustains and nourishes, in times of flood strips the interior, pumps its life-blood out into the ocean. I had seen an aerial photograph of the mouth taken at the time of the 1988 floods – a great muddy plume of topsoil extending several kilometres out to sea. It had seemed a fitting tribute to the Great River's journey across a subcontinent. A much grander send-off than today's arc of mud, which reached no more than a few hundred metres offshore.

Off to the south a diamond-diving boat was making for Alexander Bay. A bright yellow pipe, the type used to dredge diamondiferous gravel, was coiled on its aft deck. I thought of Demitrios Tsafendas, the man who assassinated Verwoerd in 1966. At the start of that year, Tsafendas was working on a dredger at the Orange River mouth. He loved seafood and regularly checked the filters through which the mud and diamonds were sucked for the lobster that sometimes lodged there. Tsafendas lasted two months on board the dredger. His next employment was as a messenger in

parliament. There is a great irony attached to Tsafendas getting this job. It was menial and poorly paid, the type of job usually filled by a coloured person in apartheid Cape Town. The dignity of parliament, however, demanded a white person. Tsafendas was born half-Greek, half-African in colonial Mozambique. South African officials mistakenly classified him white, explaining away his skin colour as Mediterranean, of Greek origin. His attendance at coloured prayer meetings and social functions in Cape Town was thus illegal. Tsafendas visited the Population Registration Office in 1965 to get his racial classification changed to coloured. This at a time when many coloureds were attempting to be re-classified white. Tsafendas knew what he was letting himself in for. His life had been defined by racial prejudice. 'They called me half-caste,' was his constant refrain when a television crew visited him in prison in the 1990s, 'they called me half-caste.' His extensive travels – Egypt, Jordan, Greece, Turkey, Portugal, Germany, the USA – were stamped by a litany of deportation orders, by a failure to fit in anywhere.

In August 1966 Tsafendas took a whites-only job in parliament. His application to become coloured was somewhere in the bureaucratic mill. A month later, under the pretext of delivering a message, he approached the prime minister and stabbed him four times. 'Verwoerd was evil so I killed him,' he explained. The nationalists tried to portray Tsafendas as mad. He wasn't half as mad, though, as the country around him.

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SOURCES

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Alf Wannenburgh's *Forgotten Frontiersmen* (Timmins, c.1980) and Lawrence Green's *To the River's End* (Timmins, 1948) provided early inspiration. Works of recurrent value to me were A.R Willcox's *Great River: the story of the Orange River* (Drakensberg , 1986), Vernon Forbes's *Pioneer Travellers of South Africa* (Balkema, 1965), Patrick Cullinan's *Robert Jacob Gordon* (Struik Winchester, 1992) and two unpublished Ph.D. theses: Nigel Penn's 'The Northern Cape Frontier Zone' (UCT, 1995) and Martin Legassick's 'The Griqua, the Sotho-Tswana, and the Missionaries, 1780-

1840: the politics of a frontier zone' (UCLA, 1970). Legassick's many published articles on the northern frontier were indispensible to my project.

Wherever possible, I give the earliest publication date for each work. I do not repeat sources mentioned in the text.

Chapter 1: Jesus and the Grand Inquisitor appear in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879). For the Anglo-Boer War sequence I used *Scorched Earth* edited by Fransjohan Pretorius (Human and Rousseau, 2001), Bill Nasson's *Abraham Esau's War* (C.U.P., 1991), and a series of articles by Nigel Penn that appeared in the May to November 1999 issues of *Getaway* magazine. Deneys Reitz's 'starving, ragged men' is from *Commando* (Faber and Faber, 1929) and Willem van Riet's loneliness from *Stroom af in my Kano* (Tafelberg, 1966). Martin Amis uses 'rangy, big-cocked, well-travelled' in the opening paragraph of *The Rachel Papers* (1973).

Chapter 2: For the science of race I used several articles in the November 1994 issue of *Discover* magazine. For Millin I used the *Dictionary of South African biography* and J.M. Coetzee's 'Blood, Flaw, Taint, Degeneration: the case of Sarah Gertrude Millin' in *English Studies in Africa* (Vol. 19, No. 1, 1980). Hitler's words appear in *Mein Kampf* (1924). Schreiner's 'red-hot pincers' observation is quoted in Sheila Patterson's *Colour and Culture in South Africa: a study of the status of the Cape Coloured people* (Routledge, 1953). I found Petrus Vaalbooi's racial hierarchy quote in 'Words that click and rustle softly like the wind,'an article that appeared in the *Mail and Guardian* newspaper of 12 September 1997. The 'no craft more advanced than a floating log' observation is made by Willcox in *Great River*. I got the idea of using Sparrman's quote in connection with Schmidtsdrif from Dan Jacobson's *The Electronic Elephant* (Hamish Hamilton, 1994). For the discussion of Khoisan origins I used Andy Smith and his co-authors' two books *The Bushmen of Southern Africa* and *The Cape Herders* (both David Philip, 2000). I supplemented Peter Beaumont's chat on the origins of humankind with snippets from many sources, but mostly from John Reader's *Africa: a biography of the continent*. (Hamish Hamilton, 1997). My major references for the discussion of mixed race were *The Shaping of South African Society 1652-1840* edited by Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (Maskew Miller Longman, 1989), Cheryl Hendricks's ''Ominous' Liaisons' in *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place* edited by Zimitri Erasmus (Kwela, 2001) and J.S. Marais's *The Cape Coloured People, 1652 - 1937*. (Longman's, 1939). The list of slave origins comes from Vernie February's *Mind your Colour: the coloured stereotype in South African literature* (Kegan Paul, 1981). I supplemented February's discussion on the origins of Afrikaans with a pamphlet issued by the Afrikaans Language Museum in Paarl. The Etienne le Roux 'mongrel toughness' quote comes from his novel *Magersfontein o Magersfontein* (Human and Rousseau, 1976). For the Griqua story I drew on Marais, Wannenburgh's *Forgotten Frontiersmen*, Penn's 'The Northern Cape Frontier Zone,' Legassick's 'The Griqua...' as well as his

article 'The Northern Frontier to c.1840: the rise and decline of the Griqua people' in Elphick and Giliomee, and a selection of pamphlets from the Mary Moffat Museum in Griquatown. I copied the Griqua prayer years ago from one of Ryszard Kapuściński's books, *Another Day of Life*, I think, the Angolan one. The frontier discussion draws from *The Frontier in History: North America and Southern Africa compared* edited by Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson (Y.U.P., 1981) and Paul Horgan's *Great River: the Rio Grande in North American history*. (Rinehart, 1954).

Chapter 3: I supplemented Barrow's telling of Stephanos with Penn and Legassick's theses. For Danster I used Elisabeth Anderson's *A History of the Xhosa of the Northern Cape 1795-1879* (UCT Press, 1985), and for the Burchell piece Isaac Schapera's introduction to the 1953 edition of Burchell's *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa* (Batchworth) and Eve Palmer's *The Plains of Camdeboo* (Jonathan Ball, 1993). The windmill sequence is based on James Walton's *Windpumps in South Africa* (Human and Rousseau, 1998) and on a visit to the Windmill museum in Loeriesfontein. For the Koegas atrocities I used Teresa Strauss's *War along the Orange* (UCT Press, 1979) and D.P. Faure's *My Life and Times* (Juta, 1907). My sources for Robert Gordon included Forbes's *Pioneer Travellers*, Patrick Cullinan's *Robert Jacob Gordon* and 'In the Footsteps of Gordon,' an article by Andy Smith published in the *Quarterly Bulletin of the SA Library* (1991). The biography of the river draws on Willcox's *Great River*, Pieter Van der Walt's *Augrabies Splendour* (Info Naturae, 2000) and A.Z.A. Van Jaarsveld's *Mont tot Mond* (self-published, 2000). The history of boats on the Orange is from Willcox. For the Eiselen Line and apartheid sequences I used Ian Goldin's *Making Race: the politics and economics of coloured identity in South Africa* (Maskew Miller, 1987), Vernie February's *Mind your Colour*, Muriel Horrell's *Race Classification in South Africa: its effect on human beings* (SAIRR, 1959) and the South African Native Affairs Commission Report of 1905. Lawrence Green's *Karoo* (Timmins, 1955) was my source for the Draghoender and Putsonderwater stories. Scott's Baster quote is from Martin Legassick's 'The Battle of Naroegas,' a seminar paper delivered at the University of the Western Cape (1994). I balanced Metrowitch's account of Scotty Smith with the rather more sober *Dictionary of South African Biography*. For more on the trade in San remains see Legassick and Rassool's *Skeletons in the Cupboard* (South African Museum, 2000). For canal history I used Legassick's 'The Will of Abraham and Elizabeth September' in the Journal of African History (Vol. 37, No. 3, 1996) as well as Willcox's *Great River* and a conversation with Kolie Strauss of the farm Bloemsmond near Kanoneiland.

Chapter 4: Scotty Smith's horse theft comes from F.C. Metrowitch's *Scotty Smith* (Books of Africa, 1983). I used Teresa Strauss's *War along the Orange* for Dyason's death, as well as a conversation with Owen Davies, owner of the farm Dyason's Klip. For the Korana and northern border war sequences I

supplemented Strauss's account with E.E. Mossop's *The Journals of Wikar, Coetsé and Van Reenen* (Van Riebeeck Society, 1935) and Legassick's 'Griqua...' and 'The Northern Frontier.' Legassick was my sole source for the renegade settlers. For the frontier piece I used Lamar and Thompson's *The Frontier in History* and Wannenburg's *Forgotten Frontiersmen*. Philip's quote is from his *Researches in South Africa* (Duncan, 1828), the surveyor Moffat's from 'Report of a survey of a portion of the Orange River, eastward of Little Namaqualand' (Government Publications, 1858), Marais's from *The Cape Coloured People*, Theal's from *History of South Africa, from 1795 to 1872* (Allen and Unwin, 1919) and Thompson's from *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa* (Colburn, 1827). For Basterland I used Maria de Beer's *Keimoes en Omgewing* (Keimoes Municipality, 1992), a conversation with farmer Willie Snyman and four papers by Martin Legassick: 'The Will of Abraham and Elizabeth September,' 'The Battle of Naroegas,' 'The Peopling of Riemvasmaak,' a seminar paper delivered at the University of the Western Cape (1998) and 'The Racial Division of Gordonia' in *Kronos* (No. 25, 1998/9). Rupert Isaacson writes of his cousins in *The Healing Land* (Fourth Estate, 2001). For the discussion of coloured identity I used Smith *et al.*'s *The Cape Herders*, Gavin Lewis's *Between the Wire and the Wall* (David Philip, 1987), Ian Goldin's *Making Race*, Richard Parry's '"In a Sense Citizens but not Altogether Citizens..."' in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* (Vol. 17, No. 3, 1983), Bill Nasson's *Abraham Esau's War*, Reader's Digest's *Illustrated History of South Africa* (1988), *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place* edited by Zimitri Erasmus and two works by Mohamed Adhikari: his paper 'Continuity and Change in Coloured Identity in Twentieth Century South Africa,' (University of the Witwatersrand, 2001) and his unpublished PhD thesis 'Hope, Fear, Shame, Frustration: continuity and change in the expression of Coloured identity in white supremacist South Africa, 1910-1994' (UCT, 2002). The Transvaal coloured definition comes from the South African Native Affairs Commission Report of 1905, and the Attorney General and Selborne quotes from Goldin. For Kakamas I used the *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*. The work hours quote is from Legassick's 'Naroegas,' the Reitz quote from *Commando* and Conroy's speech from the Records of the Appeal Court. For the *dagga* sequence I used Mossop's *The Journals of Wikar...*, Legassick's 'Griqua...,' and a few pro-legalisation internet sites. I found the genital quote in Cheryl Hendricks's ''Ominous' Liaisons.' I used Forbes's *Pioneer Travellers* and Cullinan's *Robert Jacob Gordon* for the three Swedes.

Chapter 5: For the Augrabies sequence I used E.E. Mossop's *The Journals of Wikar...*, George Thompson's *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, Pieter van der Walt's *Augrabies Splendour* and Deneys Reitz's *No Outspan* (Faber and Faber, 1943). A. J. Clement debunks Farini in *The Kalahari and its Lost City* (Longman's, 1967). I supplemented Norbit's account of Riemvasmaak history with 'A Claim to Riemvasmaak,' a booklet issued by the Surplus People Project in Cape Town (1994), and two papers by Martin

Legassick: 'The Racial Division of Gordonia' and 'The Peopling of Riemvasmaak.' I used Thomas Packenham's *The Scramble for Africa* (Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1991) for the Nama uprising. For giraffe hunting I used Cullinan's *Robert Jacob Gordon*, Forbes's *Pioneer Travellers* and Mossop's *The Journals of Wikar, Coetsé and Van Reenen* as well as his *The Journals of Brink and Rhenius* (Van Riebeeck Society, 1947). Deneys Reitz speaks of 'Nomad Boers' in *No Outspan* (Faber and Faber, 1943). I used Albert (Trader) Jackson's *Trader on the Veld* (Balkema, 1958) and Legassick's 'Griqua...'for the *trekboers*. Cumming's 'unbroken phalanx' comes from *Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa* (Murray, 1850). I relied on a number of works for the San history: Andy Smith *et al*'s *The Bushmen of Southern Africa* and *The Cape Herders*, Shula Marks's 'Khoisan resistance to the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' in the Journal of African History (Vol. 13, No. 1, 1972), Nigel Penn's 'The Northern Cape Frontier Zone,' P.J. van der Merwe's *Die Noordwaartse Beweging van die Boere voor die Groot Trek* (Van Stockum and Zoon, 1937), Teresa Strauss's *War along the Orange*, and Deborah Findlay's unpublished B.A. Honours thesis 'The San of the Cape Thirstland and L. Anthing's 'Special Mission' (University of Cape Town, 1977). For wool I used Marais's *The Cape Coloured People* and Elisabeth Anderson's *A History of the Xhosa of the Northern Cape*. I used Willem Steenkamp's *Land of the Thirst King* (Timmins, 1975) for Tgaams, as well as a conversation with Jopie Kotze of the Springbok Café in Springbok.

Chapter 6: I supplemented Simon's account of his time at Pella with Green's *To the River's End* and 'Thirstland Epic,' a booklet on the pioneering missionaries of Namaqualand issued by the Springbok Café. For Jager Afrikaner I used Robert Moffat's *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (Snow, 1842), Wannenburg's *Forgotten Frontiersmen*, Penn's 'The Northern Cape Frontier Zone,' Legassick's 'The Griqua...' and also his article 'The Peopling of Riemvasmaak.' Campbell's appendix on Jager appears in *Travels in South Africa* (Black and Parry, 1815). I used 'Words that click and rustle softly like the wind,' an article by Eddie Koch and Siven Maslamoney in the Mail and Guardian of 12 September 1997, for the state of the Nama language. The Mostert quote comes from his book *Frontiers* (Cape, 1992). I based the history of Witbank on a booklet issued by the Surplus People's Project in Cape Town, and on a conversation with Sue Power of the SPP. For game theory I used Peter Singer's *How are we to Live?* (OUP, 1997) and Matt Ridley's *The Origins of Virtue* (Penguin, 1997), and for overgrazing two papers by Tim Hoffman, Fiona Archer and others, both published in the *Journal of the Grasslands Society of Southern Africa*: 'How economic are the farming units of Leliefontein, Namaqualand?' (Vol. 6, No. 4, 1989) and 'Communal land use and the 'tragedy of the commons'' (Vol. 7, No. 2, 1990). Hardin's paper was published in *Science* (162, 1968). For Le Vaillant I used Forbes's *Pioneer Travellers*, Willcox's *Great River* and Eve Palmer's *The Plains of Camdeboo* (the 'ludicrous, engaging' comment is hers). The road to

the north sequence draws on three works by E.E. Mossop, *Old Cape Highways* (Maskew Miller, 1927), *The Journals of Wikar, Coetsé and Van Reenen* and *The Journals of Brink and Rhenius*, two by Nigel Penn, 'The Northern Cape Frontier Zone,' and his chapter 'The Orange River Frontier Zone, c.1700-1805' in *Einiqualand: Studies of the Orange River Frontier* edited by Andy Smith (UCT Press, 1995), and one by Willem Steenkamp, *Land of the Thirst King*. I supplemented Scotland's own telling of his story with Lawrence Green's account in *Thunder on the Blaauwberg* (Timmins, 1966). For the Bondelswarts I used Gavin Lewis's unpublished MA thesis 'The Bondelswarts Rebellion of 1922' (Rhodes University, 1977) and Mike Nicol's *The Waiting Country* (Gollancz, 1995).

Chapter 7: I relied mostly on interviews for the account of past canoe trips, but also used Desmond Watkins's article 'Paddle and Plod' in the *Journal of the Mountain Club of South Africa* (No. 59, 1956), Peter Gibbs's unpublished memoirs 'A Sandalwood Box' and *Blue Sweat* (Triolit, 1986) by G. Jooste, an account of Brian van Zyl's exploits. Deneys Reitz's 'jagged country' comes from *No Outspan* and 'they care for the Halfmens...' is quoted in Emile Boonzaaier's chapter 'People, Parks and Politics' in *Restoring the Land* (Panos, 1992) edited by Mamphela Ramphele. I found the story about the Trinity College Kokerboom in Graham Williamson's *Richtersveld: The Enchanted Wilderness* (Umdaus Press, 2000), and the Halfmens legend in a brochure issued by the Richtersveld National Park. Lawrence Green tells of Aussenkehr's history in *To the River's End* and T.E. Lawrence writes of 'the stretch and sag of nerves' in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1935). For the Avenants of De Hoop I used Karl Reck's *Tracks and Trails of the Richtersveld* (self-published, 1994). For the Kubus Kwekery piece I jogged my memory with an internet search of newspaper archives.

Chapter 8: For the RNP and Nama sections I used Emile Boonzaier's 'People, Parks and Politics,' as well as his expert summary for the Land Claims Court (case 151 of 1998), Andy Smith *et al.*'s *The Cape Herders*, and a conversation with Henk Smith. The 'goats are like us brown people' speech is quoted by Ursula Mussgnug in *Einiqualand: Studies of the Orange River Frontier* edited by Andy Smith. Reck's *Tracks and Trails* gives the various spellings of Kuboes. For Lüderitz I used Green's *To the River's End* and August Sycholt's *Journey across the Thirstland* (Meinert, 1986), and for the diamond sequence Willcox's *Great River*, Williamson's *Richtersveld* and Pieter Coetzer's *Baai van Diamante* (Universiteit Vrystaat, 1997). Coetzer is the historian who points out that the San didn't realise the value of diamonds. Cornell's talks of the men that make up a rush in *The Glamour of Prospecting* (David Philip, 1986). Sean O'Connor lent me the script of his unpublished play 'Fluit Fluit Misdaad Uit.' Neville Alexander's paper 'Prospects for a non-racial future in South Africa' appears in *Beyond Racism* (Lynne Rienner, 2001) edited by Alexander and others. I used Green's *To the River's End* and Coetzer's *Baai van Diamante* for Hendrik Louw, and Cullinan's *Robert Jacob*

Gordon for Gordon at the mouth. The Tsafendas sequence comes mostly from Henk van Woerden's excellent biography *A Mouthful of Glass* (Jonathan Ball, 2000).

ILLUSTRATIONS

Thank you to Ashley Richardson for his help with scanning and picture editing. The page number for each illustration is followed by its source. LK refers to photographs taken by Laurence Kruger, CS by Christopher Sykes, and WD by the author. Pages 1, 4, 7 - WD; p.9 - cartoon by Doonesbury, unknown source; p.11 - WD; p.15 - Cape Archives; p.16 - LK; pp.17, 19, 20, 21 - WD; [Chapter 2] p.25 - WD; p.32 - Daniell, S. *African Scenery and Animals* (Balkema, 1976); pp.33, 35 - WD; p.37 - South African Library; p.40 - UCT Monday Paper (Vol. 22, No. 1, 2002); p.42 - CS; p.45 - Campbell *Travels in South Africa*; p.48 - velskoen from Smith *et al. The Cape Herders*; arabic script from Davids, A. 'The Afrikaans of the Cape Muslims from 1815 to 1915,' (unpublished MA thesis, University of Natal, 1991); p.54 - Cape Archives; p.56 - Walker, E. *Historical Atlas of Southern Africa* (OUP, 1922); p.57 - Cape Archives; p.63 - Newman, K. *Newman's Birds of Southern Africa* (Southern Books, 1991); [Chapter 3] p.65 - WD; p.70 - Burchell *Travels*; p.72 - South African Library; p.73 - WD; pp.74, 75 - LK; p.79 - WD; p.80 - Cullinan *Robert Jacob Gordon*; p.83 - WD; p.85 - Van Jaarsveld *Mont tot Mond*; p.87 - WD; p.90 - Marais *The Cape Coloured People*; p.96 - Topo-cadastral map *2820 Upington* (Chief Directorate Surveys and Land Information, 1992); p.99 - WD; [Chapter 4] p.105 - drawn by Davide Capponcelli; p.106 - WD; p.109 - Walker *Historical Atlas*; pp.117 - De Beer *Keimoes en Omgewing*; p.124 - old South African R2 note; p.126 - South African library (after Smith *et al. The Cape Herders*); p.131 - Topo-cadastral map *2820 Upington*; pp.136, 137 - WD; p.138 - Cape Archives; pp.142 - WD; p.144 - Mossop *The Journals of Wikar...*; [Chapter 5] p.147 - Addison, G. *White Water* (New Holland, 2001); p.152 - Farini *Through the Kalahari Desert*; p.154 - WD; p.157 - Bank of Namibia; p.158 - Cape Archives; p.166 - Cullinan *Robert Jacob Gordon*; p.167 - LK; p.168 - WD, WD, CS; p.173 - *Souvenir of South Africa* (Dennis Edwards, 1913?); p.175 - Norwich, O. *Maps of Southern Africa* (Jonathan Ball, 1993); p.180 - Stellenbosch alumni magazine *Matieland* (No. 1 of 1983); pp.185, 186 - WD; p.187 - LK; [Chapter 6] p.189, 191 - 'Thirstland Epic,' a booklet on the pioneering missionaries of Namaqualand sponsored by the Springbok Café, Springbok; p.197 - Topo-cadastral map *2818 Onseepkans* (Chief Directorate Surveys and Land Information, 1990); p.198 - Moffat *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa*; pp.200 - photograph courtesy of Gert Niemöller; p.202 - LK; p.205 - LK; p.210 - Willcox *Great River*; p.213 - Meiring *The Truth in Masquerade*; p.215 - Willcox *Great River*; p.217 - Smith *et al. The Cape Herders*; p.217 - WD; p.220 - Mossop *The Journals of Wikar, Coetsé and Van*

Reenen; p.226 - Scotland, A. *The London Cage* (Evan Brothers, 1957); p.232 - WD; p.233 - Weidner pamphlet courtesy of Gert Niemöller; [Chapter 7] p.237 - WD; pp.240, 242 - photographs courtesy of Peter Gibbs; p.243 - Van Riet *Stroom af in my Kano*; pp.246, 247 - photograph and envelope courtesy of Peter Roux; p.250 - WD; p.253 - photograph by Dabis Last-name-unknown; p.255 - CS; p.256 - LK; p.258 - Reck *Tracks and Trails of the Richtersveld*; p.260 - WD; p.266 - Reck *Tracks and Trails*; p.270 - *Die Burger* (December 1999); [Chapter 8] p.279 - Cornell *The Glamour of Prospecting*; p.282 - Smith *et al. The Cape Herders*; p.287 - LK; p.291 - WD; p.293, 294 - photographs taken by Sean O'Connor; p.299 - WD; p.302 - LK; p.304 - WD.